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THE MAN FROM SINGAPORE

A Romantic Novel

Romance

DR. JOHN TREDGOLD had gone to the wars, and since the fall of Singapore his wife Marte had waited in vain for news of him. Faced with the problem of earning a living for herself and her three children Marte takes a job in an exclusive West End shop, but this necessarily means that she tends to neglect her house and her family. Dust settles in the corners of her once well-cared-for rooms, and imperceptibly a rot creeps into her relations with her children. Lydia, the eldest, a pretty dark girl of twenty-three, is struggling in the bonds of a first love affair with Larry Davidson, a young actor, and Robin, her son, has lost his heart to Diane, daughter of Marte's boss. Here is an entrancing story dealing with family relations. The characters are exceptionally well drawn and the story superbly well handled by Mary Howard, who has won a secure place for herself with a very wide circle of readers.

By the Same Author

FAMILY ORCHESTRA

THE WISE FORGET	HAVE COURAGE MY HEART
RELF OF DREAMS	TO-MORROW'S HERO
DEVIL IN MY HEART	THE UNTAMED HEART
FAR BLUE HORIZONS	PARTNERS FOR PLAYTIME
IT WAS ROMANCE	STRANGERS IN LOVE

MARY HOWARD

The
Man from Singapore

A ROMANCE

COLLINS

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1946

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CHAPTER ONE

THE TREDGOLD HOME was one of those houses which in suburban London are always occupied by doctors. In fact the unpainted patch on the gate where a brass plate had been, and the row of uncleaned brass bells by the door signified it had been a doctor's house. It was situated in what is known as a good district, surrounded by wide clean roads, and bright—even for wartime—detached and semi-detached modern houses in neat small gardens. Its three-storied Victorian frontage towered over them with a shabby, paternal air. The unpruned trees of its walled-garden grew higher every year as though it were the palace of the sleeping princess. The decrepit shrubbery in the front straggled in neglect. The gravel drive became less of gravel and more of mud. The hinge on the gate had collapsed, and the shabby gate had settled into the earth of the shrubbery. You would say, glancing in as you passed along the broad clean pavement towards the shopping centre near at hand, that it was an empty house, long standing empty, until you noticed that there were still curtains at the windows, and a thin trail of smoke from one of the chimneys. There were other signs of life less visible to the casual observer. The verandah door at the back left open so that a large ginger cat could come in and out at will. Bread and milk, and various other rations left in a small perforated safe by the back door, and a notice which said brusquely, "Please leave eggs to-morrow—if any!"

At that moment—at four o'clock on a sunny spring afternoon—Marte Tredgold was seated at her desk in the costume department of Ganders large, exclusive, West End store. She was looking wearily at the five new costumes which had arrived in place of the twenty she had ordered, and they were in all the wrong colours. One could not have guessed from Marte's appearance that she had had a hard day. Perhaps a touch of acerbity in the deep, soft voice, and a hint of impatience in the fine dark eyes. She looked at the costumes speculatively and wondered how she would get on with this job in normal times, when one could not have merely what one could get, but had to choose from hundreds of costumes, from every fashionable house, of every conceivable shade and

hue. She thought also that she would like to go home and put her feet up, and read *Pickwick*, but that she had promised to go out to dinner with Andrew Gander to-night.

She also thought that Andrew Gander was very rich, very influential, very attractive, and very nice, and that he wore his fifty years with elegance and distinction, and wondered uncomfortably whether their friendship of the past two years was not showing signs of ripening suddenly into something rather more important and dangerous than friendship. She also wondered whether she could continue to handle it with charm and discretion, or whether she was going to succumb to the bitter longing to put her head down on almost any masculine shoulder and howl.

At forty-five that would be ridiculous. She also wondered if the girls would get themselves a decent meal at home to-night, and whether Robin was all in one piece, and whether he would be able not to spend more than his allowance and pay this month. But she did not think about her husband, because she had firmly decided not to think about him at all—that had been three years before. She had stopped this side of sanity when the thought of him became unbearable. She sighed, drew a pile of invoices towards her, and irrelevantly thanked heaven her ankles were still nice, even if they ached.

At that moment, Miss Lydia Tredgold, sitting opposite her immediate chief who was an extremely important government official, was answering a telephone call. Her immediate chief had an appointment and a touch of indigestion and he sat watching her and fuming with impatience while she spoke. Her soft cheeks were very hot, and her dark blue eyes were fixed intently on a large ink spot on the carpet. She wished her heart would not jump so, because she was sure that in a minute it would leap right through her crisp white shirt and hit her immediate chief in the eye.

Larry Davidson was saying, "Sweetheart, can you speak now?"

She said stiffly, "No."

"Can you meet me to-night—at the Theatre Club?"

"Well . . ."

"Darling, please—I haven't seen you for three whole days."

"All right."

"At six then—we'll have dinner."

"That will be fine."

"Angel child—I adore you. 'Bye."

"Good-bye."

She put the receiver down and drew in her breath again—she had not breathed at all for the past few seconds. Her immediate chief asked nastily if she were ready, and began to dictate at a furious speed, while inwardly he made up a severe notice forbidding private telephone calls during working hours. Then he looked up and saw Lydia's soft, sensitive mouth, and the little dark curls clinging to her forehead, and the long dark lashes hiding her eyes. Because Lydia was a very, very pretty girl he relented, wished he was twenty years younger, and was seized with another fit of chronic irritability in consequence of this thought, so that he dictated the notice after all, requested her to pin it on the board, and stalked out, leaving Lydia gazing blankly at her strokes and pot-hooks, her heart still beating fast and chimes ringing through her head. She was seeing Larry to-night.

At that moment Pilot-Officer Robin Tredgold was flying solo. Not in the wonderful Spitfire or Hurricane of his imagination, but in a training monoplane, turning above the practice ground of the A.F.U. and swooping down on the ground target, his mind teeming with imaginary enemy fighters which dived at him from every side, while he avoided their onslaught with superlative skill, his guns blazing heroically. Messerschmidt planes tumbled in blazing streaks towards the earth while parachutes blossomed against the sky. Almost at once his O.C. was congratulating him, and from there he went very quickly to Buckingham Palace and the King was smiling and shaking his hand and pinning rows of medals on his chest. From there he went to a wonderful party, with all the fellows at the Mess, and Diane Gander would hang on to his arm and gaze into his eyes with her own beautiful ones filled with admiration. This somehow brought the dream to an end. He remembered that the last time he had seen Diane Gander she had worn a fur coat which had cost far more than his income for a year, and had been surrounded by a group of ace-flyers who were all gazing into her eyes, and obviously thinking she was quite the most wonderful thing on earth. She had rarely seen him. He also remembered it was time he took this blasted crate down, and that so-and-so Flight-Lieutenant with the leather face and chest covered with medal ribbons would be waiting for him, and if he tipped her up the smallest bit, or bounced as he

came down he would snarl in a voice like a Robert Burns dialect poem, and he, Pilot-Officer Robin Tredgold, would feel like a "wee, sleekit, timorous cowerin' beastie", and anyway the whole darned war looked like being over before he was even through his training, and he was completely cheesed off.

He bore down on the target for the last time, his guns rattling, and as he did so reflected that courage in all emergencies was one of the essential qualities of a good officer. He would telephone Diane from the mess to-night, and ask her for a date—to-morrow.

Miss Bunty Tredgold, at that moment, was shooting down the impressive front steps of the Greyfield High School for Girls. She was followed by her dearest friend, Miss Patricia Hillman. They wore the usual hideous black woollen stockings, the navy macs and battered black felt hats complete with school ribbons with which the English endeavour to hide the youthful beauty of their teen-age females. They chased with many shrieks and giggles along the road and dived into a large snack-bar where they ordered buns and lemonade, took off their school hats and stuffed them into their satchels, combed up their hair into impressive pompadours in front and flowing curls behind until they resembled exotic young sea-horses. Then they carefully powdered their faces with powder several shades too light for them, and outlined their pretty lips with a violent stub of lipstick several shades too dark, and regarded themselves in the large ornate mirrors with infinite satisfaction.

Patricia was small and brown-haired and curly. Bunty was tall and slender, her hair was a wild red-gold and her eyes were blue and bright with the dawning excitements of growing up. She stuffed a bun into her mouth, and squinted into the glass behind the counter while she adjusted a red-gold ringlet to her final satisfaction.

"Wasn't the Piglet in a sweat about that history? I knew it really, but Jill had just passed me that heavenly picture of Van Johnson sitting up in bed, and I was just sticking it in the lid of my desk when she asked about Van Dyke."

"It was absolutely wizard the way you said he was the most popular star in America. Don't tell me you didn't do it on purpose to make Piglet wild. I thought she was going to gate you."

"She's not bad, really."

"I say, Bunty, mother's bought me a pair of high-heeled shoes for week-ends."

Bunty stared with consuming envy. "Oh, Pat . . . *really?* I wish mother would . . ."

"I can't understand your mother," said Pat in the superior tone of an only and much indulged child. "She's such a smashing dresser herself. I mean there's no one to touch her round here. You'd think she'd hate to see you looking such a drip."

"She's busy," said Bunty, loyal but grudging. Everyone always seemed busy these days. Different before the war when mother spent hours making her dresses—but she had thought dressing up a terrible bore then. She had liked to go fishing with Daddy. The memory of the long summer evenings and the soft splash of the fish as they jumped came back to her with unbearable vividness, but she could not remember just what he looked like, or what they had talked about together. She could not imagine enjoying fishing now.

She finished her bun, and carefully repaired her make-up. She said, to compensate for the high-heels. "Guess what? Secret. Cross your heart."

"Crossed," said Pat laconically.

"Lydia's nuts about an actor."

Patricia was impressed, but not sufficiently impressed.

"Shall we go round by the soldiers' field, or the boys' school?" asked Patricia.

"Oh, by the soldiers," said Bunty definitely, "I can't stand school-boys."

They paid their bill and began to saunter homewards, round the long way by the common, where the long army huts stood, and the bored khaki figures that brightened up so flatteringly at their self-conscious, giggling, glancing approach, whistling approval of Bunty's long legs and golden hair.

"There are some Americans," confided Patricia, "In those big old houses near your place. They say they are *awful*."

"Don't be a drip," said Bunty, her voice was casual but her eyes were interested. She glanced towards the field fence. The nice-looking one with the black hair and funny north-country accent was leaning against it, grinning at them. She wished she was twenty-one and that someone like Laurence Olivier would fall in love with her. She wished she had a long black evening gown with diamond heeled shoes. The

stillness, and the pearly beauty of the early spring evening filled her with a desperate, blind restlessness. She wished *something* would happen—something exciting.

At that moment Dr. John Tredgold, once surgeon to H.M.S. *Blakemore*, was being carried in a stretcher from an American hospital ship, and looking with astonishment at the great docks and the fleet of ambulances waiting to meet them. Fighting heat and dirt, fever, sepsis, gangrene with the contents of the little black case he had managed to cling to after the *Blakemore* went down, this was the sort of equipment he had dreamed about. He was mahogany brown, and thin to a point of emaciation, though fat compared to his condition when he had been brought aboard some weeks before. The wound in his leg was healing, and the threat of gangrene had vanished. When you have several thousand patients, allied servicemen and women, civilians, babies, brown starved islanders and whites, no medical supplies and few trained assistants, when almost everyone is suffering from malnutrition, exposure, and some form or other of anxiety neurosis, you do not think about yourself very much. John Tredgold was thin and grey, and still sick, but his bright blue eyes were sane, and his long firm mouth still smiled. Those eyes and that smile had kept a lot of people sane in the Jap prison camp. It was his grip on reality that kept him strong when he was in reality so weak. "It's not a bad dream, but it's not the end of everything," he would say. "If a thing like this can happen, it can also end. If we wait, and don't give up hope, they'll have us out of it one day."

He smiled now at a good-looking Red Cross worker who came to his side with a pencil and pad to take any message he might want to send home, and she felt suddenly ashamed of herself at referring to him *sotto-voce* as "the old doc." He was not very old at that. And he was very attractive when he smiled. He still wore, thrown across his thin shoulders, his shabby naval tunic with the naval surgeon's red bands between the gold bars on the sleeves. They had had it cleaned and baked and disinfected and given it back to him on board.

"Can I send a message for you, sir?"

"Yes, you can." He drew in a deep breath, "Mrs. John Tredgold, The Elms, Greyfield Road, London. Better send the phone number too. Then it will get through at any time." He hesitated, "Safe and well. Thanks to the

Yanks," he smiled at the pretty girl, "Soon be home. Writing. Love to you all . . ."

"What shall I sign it?"

He started. "Oh," he said, then slowly, "Sign it father . . ."

Lydia did not hurry to leave the office. Even a brief month of knowing Larry had taught her that he was invariably late. She went up to the cloak room and washed, and powdered, and combed her dark hair, added just the right touch of lipstick for her dreamy pallor, and polished her nails. She killed time deliberately. Brushed her suit—it was a very good grey suit which her mother had bought for her from the Store—mother had a flare for clothes, and she knew she looked very nice in it. She was slim, just the right height, with none of Bunty's magnificent tall-willowness. She was round, small, feminine, desirable. Her eyes were the blue of dark delphiniums, her hair smooth and shoulder length, curling under gently at the ends. She put on a flat black beret, and knew that she looked both pretty and confident. It was a pity she felt such a perfect idiot inside. Nervous and worried and out of her depth. She had thought she knew a good deal about men, until Larry came, and then she realised her experience was extremely limited. Larry was different. Larry apparently fell in love like falling off a wall, flat, with no pretences or reticences. Boys had fallen in love with her before—no one had said at their first meeting, "I adore you." No one had said to her before, and of all places on top of a crowded bus, and in a wonderful, sonorous voice, "You are the most breathlessly lovely thing that has ever come into my life." Thrilling, flattering, wonderful, difficult.

Of course she knew she was not the first woman in Larry's life, not by a long way, but she hoped fervently that she would be the last. Because he was not a flirt—he did not glance at another woman when he was with her. Perhaps she would have felt safer if he had. You never thought, somehow, of marrying or settling down with Larry. It was a love-affair. It always would be. It was like living on a diet of champagne and angel-cake, and sometimes she had to admit, hating herself for her disloyal criticism, being hungry for bread and cheese. It was all the happiness, the excitement and wonder she had ever dreamed of, but frightening too, and dangerous. It was silly but she was frightened of him, or rather of the

power he held over her, she was afraid of herself, and the wild response which he woke so easily in her veins. And she could not help feeling a little ashamed of herself for being afraid. Fear had no place in love . . . and she was so completely in love, drowning in an azure sea of delight.

She walked slowly through the London streets towards the West End. The plane trees were just bursting into leaf, and the starlings and sparrows chattered in their branches. Lydia walked along gravely, a pretty girl, lost in her thoughts. She hoped desperately that Larry would get this new part. He had hardly any money left, she was sure, and he simply would not be careful. Being an actor was different from coming out of the services into an ordinary job. And if he did not get a job within a short while, they might draft him into essential work, because his injured foot was healing better than any one had imagined . . . but then Larry had gone to the best specialist in London, and goodness knows how he was ever going to pay that bill. But a factory or office would be bad for him . . . bad for his health and for his morale, because he was so desperately anxious to go back to the stage. He was young, he was wildly good-looking, he had charm, he had personality, he had a certain amount of training, and a small forgotten reputation from way back . . . he must go back. This was his chance.

She reached the entrance to the Theatre Club, hoping he would have arrived first, but knowing it was a forlorn hope. There was no one there. She supposed being the wife of a genius was always an anxious job. Like having a child and a man in one. One never really heard of the successful wives of great actors and artists . . . only their divorces. But she wondered if it was the successful, unknown wife who made them function. That would be rather wonderful, unknown, unsung—holding the candle; feeding the flame, nurturing the . . .

“Why, hallo, Lyddy!”

She turned sharply, irritated by the childish, nursery name. Her heart dropped with disappointment when she saw the tall thin young man standing beside her. It was not Larry. Anything more, unlike Larry's graceful presence could scarcely be imagined. Dr. Ian McNab was at least six feet tall, he had an enormous breadth of shoulder, and his ill-fitting shabby clothes hung on his great spare frame like those of an oversized scarecrow. He was twenty-nine, but Lydia with the

cruel indifference of twenty-three thought he looked very old indeed.

"He must be making oodles of money," she thought, rather crossly, because she was getting impatient about Larry, and getting worried too in case he turned up while Ian still stood there—not that she really *minded* anyone knowing about Larry—but mother was getting rather stuffy with her disapprovals these days. "Why can't he buy himself some decent clothes? After all he has all father's practice now as well as his own." A little of this resentment must have shown in her glance, for Ian's long mouth tightened, and the little lines of weariness seemed to deepen round his long grey eyes.

She said partly, "What are you doing in the giddy West End?"

He said in his quiet voice with the soft Highland lilt behind it, "It's my day off—I have a day off, you know."

"I hope you've had a good time."

"Ay, good enough." He had been at Guy's watching an operation. One of his own patients, and something he had never struck before. Officially he had the evening free as well, but there was a baby he knew would not wait until morning to be born, and a few hours sleep would be a good idea before that caught up with him. He looked at Lydia, at the soft young sulkiness of her, dark and secret like a red rose. "Ma' love is like a red, red rose that's newly blown in June . . ."

"What?" said Lydia.

"I did not speak."

Her eyes mocked him good-naturedly. She found his admiration funny and flattering. "He's absolutely gothic," she thought flippantly, "Towering and grey and hard."

"Don't tell me," she said aloud, "that you have taken to talking to yourself?"

He smiled. "Lyddy, I have just an hour. Will you come and have some tea with me?"

"It's very kind of you, Ian, to offer me your valuable time, but I have an appointment."

"Oh. Then I'll not keep you," he hesitated, and then said, "Have you heard anything from your father?"

"No. Nothing." Her mouth set tightly. No one else ever asked about father. It was so long now that even she hardly ever thought of him. Once, every morning, she had wished passionately that her mother might have a letter, or some

word. But she had given up thinking about it this past year. She had not thought about it once since she had known Larry. But Ian always remembered.

"You'll be hearing one day," he said, then, "That's a very pretty hat you have, but there's too much of that make-up on your mouth!"

"Oh!"

The colour flared up into her face and an angry reply rose to her lips, but she found his grave eyes were unaccountably laughing at her. Just because he was six years older than herself he had no right to treat her as though she was Bunty's age.

"I suppose," she said savagely, "that you think tea in a bun shop with you would be a great treat for me."

"It would be a great treat for me," he said. "Good-night to you." He raised his hat abruptly, and banged down its shapeless felt on to his black hair again, and stalked off into the crowd.

She watched him, her indignation fading. You could not be angry with someone you had known so long. She watched him plunge across through the traffic with his curious absent-minded purposefulness. He still limped when he walked—he had got that limp playing rugger for his university. Father had always said Ian would have played for Scotland one day, if he had not broken his knee. Father liked him. He used to come to The Elms and see father. He could play a fine game of tennis in spite of his game leg. A tall, gawky, raw-boned Scots boy he had been then. Could it only be seven years ago? He looked so much older. Could she have only been Bunty's age? Mother had tried to keep the practice on after the navy had recalled father. Things had been difficult for all their money had been invested in Pacific companies. There had been locums. The young one who drank and who would have lost that appendix case if it had not been for Ian. The old one who was clever but who would not get up at night for all the urgent cases in the word. That had made mother decide to close up and go out to business herself. All the patients had no choice but to go down across the High Road to Ian's shabby little working-class practice. He never came to see them now. Of course he was terribly over-worked, but he did have a day and evening off. Yet, if he had come, there would probably be no one in. No one to-night, except perhaps Bunty, and she would probably be at the flicks.

Two hands came round her neck from behind, and there was a smell of violets. She did not turn. She watched the long sensitive hands pinning the violets into the lapel of her coat, and beneath their touch her heart was frantic with excitement.

"Oh, Larry . . ." she said softly, and looked up into his eyes.

It was six o'clock. Marte went into one of the fitting rooms and took off her plain black, tailored dress. She sat in her slip before the mirror brushing her glittering silvery-black hair, watching the movements of her strong, supple shoulders, bending forward gravely to examine the little lines in the smooth skin about her eyes.

"I'm getting greyer than ever," the black eyes regarded the reflection with distaste, "If I don't relax soon I shall be a hag."

Her first assistant came in wearing a suit of sealing-wax red, and began to do up her blonde Edwardian. She had a husband in a ministry and a small child whom she left with one of those aged but efficient nannies that some people's lives are blessed with. Marte regarded her without enthusiasm. She had been causing a violent and feline row all day with the second sales over an alteration to a coat which the second sales had ordered while she was out at lunch. She was not yet forty, extremely attractive, and she was one of those women who had many elderly relations "who, my dear, simply don't want their clothes coupons—but have absolutely no use for them!" She glanced at Marte and asked, but not very interestedly, "On a whirl?"

Marte reached for her white shirt. It was a nice expensive shirt, and the darns under the arms and on the elbows did not show when she wore her costume jacket.

"Not really," she sighed. She and Lydia had talked about distempering the lounge for the past year—but Lydia was always out lately, and she herself was too tired. Bunty's clothes. Bunty must have some new clothes. She was at the stage when left to herself she would wear six-inch heels and eye-veils. She sometimes wondered whether it would not have been better to let Bunty go to a cheaper school than the High—or even out to business, and not have worried about keeping Robin at Highdene for the two years before he had been called up. It would perhaps have been better to cut

down on every expense and stayed at home herself. The house simply was not a home any more. At weekends and in the evenings she was too tired to battle with it. What were the duties of a mother when you had decided to be father as well?

"You don't look as though you wanted to go out very much."

"I don't know that I do. There's so much to do at home. Bunty will be alone, if Lydia is late, and I don't like her to be alone."

The first assistant put on a small black hat of incredible smartness. She said, "Oh, it's impossible to get anything done. After a day in this dump the only thing to do is to go out and enjoy yourself. We're going to the first night at the King's . . . and to a party afterwards. I think it's silly to hang yourself round your child's neck. They don't thank you for it afterwards. My mother was an awful bore, always worrying about me—I'm certainly not going to make that mistake with Geniveve."

Geniveve was three. Three, thought Marte foolishly—to have them all three again, perpetually three, wanting to be cannibals and shooting each other in the shrubbery, wanting to be pantomime fairies and fly. All of them three, safe, nothing more dangerous than occasional cut knees or hurt feelings. No friends you did not know. That Patricia girl with the come-hither eyes that Bunty was always with lately. Robin, knowing all sorts of girls she had never seen. Lydia and this young actor. "*They don't thank you for it!*" Yes, perhaps she was right. They resented it if you did interfere. Or had she lost the trick of talking to them. They used to come and pour out their secret troubles. They used to be one whole, a family, not disintegrated into so many separate pieces. John had always understood the children, as he had understood everyone. It was being a doctor, she supposed—like young Ian. No use thinking of John. That train of thought was hopeless. It led back to heat and starvation, and all the horror stories of Jap camps that the newspapers published and kind people told you. No use thinking of that. It was a dead end. She must try to steer her own course alone.

She had thought about Ian—she followed this thought resolutely. How tired and old the boy looked. Of course, the practice was heavy. And he never looked after himself. She ought to go down and see him, or have him up for Sunday lunch. But what time had she? And he would not like her to

think he could not look after himself. Though she could pretend that she had that old pain again, where she had once wrenched her shoulder and go to see him at the surgery. The thoughts of the China seas, torpedoes, and little unimaginable yellow men were fading. Marte pulled on her navy skirt, and said casually, "Do you know anything about Larry Davidson?"

"Do I?" the plucked eyebrows went up. "My dear!

Who do you think got him all that publicity? No one but my infatuated sister on the *Daily Chime*. War hero returns to stage. And what was he but a small town provincial player?"

"But—he has a good war record, hasn't he?"

"Yes, oh, yes, I suppose so."

"After all—it's understandable in an actor to use it as publicity."

"Yes, I suppose so. What are you interested for? He's one of these glamour boys from whom no woman is safe," the mascaraed lids flickered, "At any age."

Marte grinned, the shaft sliding by. Age did not matter so much as the hurrying years. Sometimes she thought it would be nice to be really old, with no future, and the dreams of youth far away in the mists of the past, not mocking you from quite near, reminding you that the years were passing so quickly, and that your young life, your time of enjoyment was slipping quickly by, and that some people—Lydia perhaps, Robin—and Bunty certainly already thought of her as old. She shut her mind again. She was getting very adept at that, shutting her mind to things, and perhaps her eyes too.

She put on her severely smart hat on her glittery short hair, and outlined her mouth firmly with a bright lipstick. She was only forty-five. She was going out to dinner with a very personable and wealthy man, to be with whom even a young and gorgeous woman would be flattered. To sit and mope about her loneliness was merely being what Bunty would call a drip. She had a fleeting vision of Bunty as she had seen her that morning when she went out of the house, wearing Lydia's long red dressing-gown, with her bright hair pinned on top, little damp curls clinging damply to her neck and forehead after her bath. Lovely—growing-up. How did she spend her time? What was she doing now? She had not really realised that grown-upness until today. And Lydia? She must ask Mady about that Davidson boy. Mady Radnor

was her sister, and a very famous actress, a very great busybody too. She would be sure to know.

The first assistant said suddenly, "You have great distinction, you know, Mrs. Tredgold."

Marte pulled on her gloves. That was something, anyhow. She smiled, picked up her bag, said good-night, and went down in the service lift and out into the Spring evening.

Andrew opened the taxi door as he saw her leave the building, and she got in with a little grateful sigh, leaned back, and did not mind when Andrew retained her hand, giving it a comforting little pat. It was always like this, when she was with him. She relaxed. She forgot her worries, the big ones and the tiresome petty ones that nagged at her all day. It was not that the big store she had just left belonged to him, or that he had so much money that if he wished he could smooth life out before you like a magician with a magic carpet. It was simply that he was nice, quiet, intelligent, interesting . . . and interested in her. A big man, superlatively well-dressed, emitting that faint comforting perfume of good soap and tobacco. A good-looking man who was very fond of her. She sighed.

"I don't know whether it isn't becoming a drug, Andrew, this coming out with you, instead of getting on with the things I should do, I just let myself forget about them and wallow in luxury."

He smiled at her. "That's just what I want you to do."

His hand tightened momentarily over hers. "I've got a table at the Savoyard, and I've told them to keep us some chicken, and they have a very decent claret . . ."

"At an exorbitant price, I expect." She looked out at the evening London whirling past, grey vistas and crowds of people. More people than ever it seemed. Younger people, people in uniform thronging past. The queer yearning eagerness of the evening caught her, and she said suddenly, "Oh, Andrew. I'm growing old."

He laughed suddenly. "You're growing more beautiful."

She turned, smiling at him, felt for a moment as though she were crossing some emotional rubicon, some important divide, felt his arms about her, and his lips upon hers, and was shaken by the bare-faced hunger of her response. She did not want this, not herself, not her known everyday self . . . but underneath there had been a deep physical basic need for this comforting reassuring fulfilment.

She laughed, a little shakily. "Andrew—in a taxi! I shall change my mind about my age. I haven't been kissed in a taxi since I was in my twenties."

"Too long," he said calmly. The taxi was just stopping at the Savoyard. "We've been drawing towards this night for some time, Marte—now we've got to face things, and talk."

Outside the Theatre Club Lydia had raised her eyes from the bunch of violets that Larry had given her, and looked straight into the passing taxi. She stood quite still, her face white, her eyes hard and frightened. It was her mother. It could not be true. It was dreadful . . . but it was her mother.

"What's the matter, angel child," Larry asked. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

Lydia looked up at him with a queer, quick, fleeting glance, it startled him, it was so different from her usual shy expression. Larry was twenty-six. He was tall, dark and slim and unutterably graceful. He wore his very good clothes with a careless ease, and his immaculate grooming seemed to add rather than to detract from this impression of casual perfection. He had a dark, Italianate face with expressive eyes of a misleading, long-lashed softness, and a long, hard, humorous curly mouth. His hair was thick, black and shining like a cat's fur. Lydia looked up at him, and woke from her bad dream. He pinned the violets carefully in her lapel, his fingers just touching her face, his eyes fixed on her downcast lashes and the softly changing colour in her cheeks, enjoying the emotion that rose at his touch. The flowers were fixed, a long finger turned her face up to meet his eyes.

"Astonishing," he said gravely. "They are exactly the same colour as your eyes. There are drops of water in the flowers, and there are two large tears in your eyes. What has hurt you, beloved?"

Lydia felt the tight band across her heart relax. After all it was no business of hers. Nowadays everyone minded their own business. She was grown-up now. She had to look at these things sensibly. Mother was attractive, and still young, and of course she knew quite a lot of men, but . . . She paused in her train of thought, a panic-cry from childhood tearing aside her reasoning. "*Mother . . . Mother . . . !*" It was like having the ground swept from under your feet. But the ground, she thought, with a sudden and unusual

cynicism, had been crumbling away these past two years. She must be reasonable, but the unreasonable thought persisted. It was her mother. People's mothers, not real mothers, just did not do that kind of thing."

"Was it because I was late?" Larry was saying. "I'm sorry. I had to see that chap about the part."

She smiled, "A good part?"

"No, a stupid, trivial, cheap part. I'm not taking it."

"Oh, Larry," she said anxiously, "Don't you think . . . ?"

He touched her lips authoratively, and her veins tingled at his touch. However ugly and insecure the world was at least she had this . . . This magical, delirious excitement of being in love. "No," he said, "We've been through all that before. It has to be the right part, or nothing at all."

"But . . ."

"But why worry? I have money in my pocket still, and a roof over my head. When they go, then we can start worrying."

They had entered the cheerful little dining-room of the Theatre Club, and found a table by the wall. Larry took a quick, comprehensive glance about the room, noting every familiar, famous or useful face, and sat down. "Nothing much this evening," he passed her the menu. "What will you have, sweetheart?"

"I want to talk to you seriously."

His mouth twitched. "Let's hear it . . . you are quite adorable when you are serious, Lydia."

"Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing, my precious."

"Well, why do we have to come to places like this—always? I—I think, though it worries me a little, that you are quite right to wait for a good part. But, darling, it's three months now since you were discharged . . ."

"They won't get me into a factory, if that's what you mean," he said grimly.

"They might," she said quickly, the idea of Larry in a factory was unimaginable. "But why can't we go to some little cheap place?"

His eyes were impatient. "And admit I'm beaten? No. I've got to go where successful people go. I've got to look as though it doesn't matter whether I work or not. This is the sort of place where you make good contacts . . . where you

meet people. Besides, I couldn't bear to take you to a cheap place . . ."

"But you're getting into debt." Lydia's puritan conscience steeled her against his blarney. The Tredgolds had put up with so much these last years to avoid debt, to keep going and keep straight, trying to sort out the essentials and to stick to them. To mother their education had been essential. Lydia still felt a little guilty when she thought of Marte going to business, and hating it so much at first. Remembering her distress when neglect had crept into the home she had loved so much, remembering how tired she often was. She deserved to go out and enjoy herself sometimes. But that brought back the picture framed in the taxi window. She supposed the man was Andrew Gander. She had only seen a well-tailored back and a head of thick grey hair. Andrew Gander. He was married . . . he had a daughter of nineteen, because Robin had met her and behaved as though she had been Betty Grable or something. Oh, everything just got worse, the more you thought about it. But she still could not see Larry's attitude that nothing but the best was good enough for him, and if it were at all possible he was going to have it.

He took her hand, spreading the fingers separately on the white cloth, touching each smooth pink almond shaped nail separately. "Don't natter at me, my only love," he said gently, "People haven't got to lend you money, or trust you with credit, unless they want to, and I'm always perfectly honest about how long it is likely to be before they get it back."

"All right," she said, and drew in a little breath. "If that's the case, you've got to let me pay half our expenses when we go out. I at least have a regular job," her hand curled and tightened in his. "Will you, Larry?"

His dark eyes flickered over her lovely, earnest face for a moment, and fell to the hand curled beneath his. "Very well, you little silly. If it will please you . . ." he touched her hand, swiftly with his lips.

Lydia gave a little sigh, wondering whether she had won a victory or not, wondering whether she had wanted him to refuse indignantly, or not. She opened her bag quickly, took out two notes, and slipped them unobtrusively into his pocket. He caught her hand, and for a moment held it in his, his face very near to hers. She felt her nerves shiver at his nearness.

"Larry . . ." she did not look up at him.

" Yes? "

" Am I—really your only love? "

He did not answer, and she glanced up quickly. He was not looking at her now, he was looking across to the door of the restaurant, and her glance followed his. Two women had come in, and the waiter was leading them to a table on the far side of the room. One was a slender, very beautiful woman in her early thirties, blonde and cool, superlatively dressed in grey. The other was a middle-aged, greying woman in an elderly fur coat slung over a fashionless and nondescript dress. Her wispy hair was bunched up on top, her brown, gypsy-looking face was guiltless of make-up and covered with a net of fine lines. Her eyes were dark, observant and humorous. She was hung about with amber beads and earrings, and she carried an enormous bag which bulged books, knitting, manuscripts and a large roll of French bread in extraordinary confusion.

" Oh, dear! " said Lydia. " It's Aunt Mady. It never occurred to me we might run into her here. "

Larrys brows went up. " No? " he said quietly . . . it had occurred to him. " It's funny that you are so closely related to Mady Radnor, and yet you hardly ever mention her name. I suppose it's a case of familiarity. "

Lydia laughed. " I suppose so. When you've known someone since you were born, and spent holidays with them, and been given birthday presents and had your seat well smacked by them when you are naughty, it's very difficult to remember they are also very important public figures. "

He gave her a quick, comprehensive glance, impatiently. " It might be. But I can't understand how you can forget that she is one of the greatest artists living to-day. Why, just to watch her in any part is an experience . . . and she's producing now. " He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. " I wonder why she is with Astra Grey? "

" The fair woman? " said Lydia quickly. " She's lovely —isn't she? "

" Yes, " he replied absently. " Very lovely. "

Lydia felt suddenly lost, and far away from him. Only a moment ago they had seemed so close and intimate—so together. They finished their meal in silence, Larry lost in his thoughts, Lydia silent, a little hurt. When the waiter brought their bill, Larry thoughtlessly took her two crumpled notes from his pocket and paid it with one, finished his coffee, and

tipped the man generously when he returned with the change. The waiter, thus encouraged, made a fuss about drawing back their chairs, and helping Larry into his coat. Lydia thought worriedly that Aunt Mady would be sure to see them, and then she would telephone mother, and that would mean questions. Then she thought stubbornly, "Mother has no right to question me now . . ." She saw Aunt Mady's dark, observant gypsy eyes upon her and raged feebly, wishing Larry would hurry with his coat so that they could get away. There was no need for him to stand chatting to the waiter like that. She knew he had that theatrical trick of almost irresistible charm which he could not help using on almost everyone, especially new people and people who served him. But the evening was going and she must catch her train in another hour. They would not have much time for their usual walk through St. James's Park.

He turned round, hat in his hand, his face a little taut and angry.

"Well," he said, "Where now?"

For a moment she was hurt, not understanding him, then his fine dark brows lifted with a quizzical little smile, as though she were a child who was refusing to learn some obvious lesson. "Come along then," he said briefly.

"Oh, Larry," her words tumbled over each other. "Of course, how stupid of me. I didn't think. Of course, you *want* to meet Aunt Mady. I'm sorry, I . . ."

"Darling," he said crisply, "Don't fuss."

He took her arm, steering her skilfully between the tables until they were passing the one where the two famous actresses sat. Astra Grey raised languid eyes from her omelette and regarded the slender, dark, attractively impudent face before her. One could do something with that face, she thought idly. Mady Radnor put down her fork, and looked speculatively into Lydia's pretty, confused face, noticed, without even knowing she was noticing it, the anxiety in her eyes, and then the faint trembling of her hands as she drew her down into a capacious embrace.

"Well, Lyddy—this is a surprise!" Her voice had a soft, resonant quality, and it seemed to Lydia that it travelled into the very corners of the room. She was conscious of heads turning. "Well, Lyddy, how are you—and how is your mother, and the children?" Aunt Mady did not wait for an answer. "I've been meaning to come out to see you, but

there . . . you're never in. One of the peculiarities of war-time. No one is ever in any more."

"We'd be in if you telephoned, Aunt Mady."

"Take no notice—I'm just making excuses," intoned Aunt Mady mischievously, "I've no intention of traipsing right out to Greyfield. I'm too busy, and I expect your mother is too?"

"Yes—yes, she's pretty busy." Lydia was acutely conscious that Astra Grey was leaning back very calmly, one exquisite hand playing with a lock of her long fair hair, looking up, undisturbed by their conversation, at Larry, and Larry with complete composure and undoubted interest was looking back at her. "Yes," she said again, "she's awfully busy."

"And who, may I ask, is this young man who looks like Iachimo to your Imogen?" It was Lydia's second name Imogen—as her godmother, Aunt Mady had chosen it and presented her with a complete Works of Shakespeare. "She must be called Imogen—she's so transparently honest," she had said.

"Oh, Aunt Mady . . . this is Larry Davidson, a friend of mine," Lydia said hastily, "This is my Aunt, Miss Radnor, Larry. Larry," she said, knowing frantically that she was doing all this very badly, "is an actor too. He wants to meet you so much, Aunt Mady."

"Himph!" Aunt Mady looked him over, and extended a long wrinkled hand covered with garnets and amber, which Larry bent over as though she were a queen. Astra Grey said very quietly, "Iachimo?" on a note of question, and Aunt Mady caught her glance and grinned, and they both sat looking at Larry with a curious, smiling interest, "As though," Lydia thought indignantly—"As though he were a thoroughbred horse."

"This is Miss Grey," said Aunt Maud abruptly.

"I know," said Larry quickly, and Astra smiled at them.

"I've heard of you, young man," said Aunt Mady.

"I hope you've heard—good?" he replied.

"Morally, or professionally?"

His dark smile lit the saturnine face with quick humour.

"Between two artists—only the professional reputation matters," he said impudently.

Lydia was conscious of being in a world she did not understand. Of being a stranger, very much on the outside.

She thought resentfully. "He's looking at Aunt Mady as though she were nineteen and beautiful," and then thought with quick remorse that in her queer, rag-bag untidy way she was beautiful. Her wrinkled face was like fine ivory. But Astra Grey was beautiful in any man's language.

"What are you doing now?" asked Astra in her clear, lovely voice.

"Nothing."

"Nothin?" repeated Aunt Mady in surprise. "With male actors at a premium and handsome *young* actors practically black-market goods."

"I'm not taking anything that's not worth taking," said Larry, and there was a ring of desperate sincerity in his voice, "I don't want to make a reputation on flapper appeal—or my looks. I want to be real. I want to be great. I want to work with people like you, so that I can learn to be great, so that when I am your age, Miss Radnor, people will still think I'm the greatest of them all—as they do you . . ."

His voice heaped flowers in her wrinkled hands. He was completely sincere. Larry was such a mixture of moods, emotions and artificialities that you could never pin him down. But this time he was really sincere.

"Hmmp—pretty!" said Aunt Mady.

"Will you telephone me to-morrow, Iachimo?" asked Astra.

"At home?" he replied eagerly.

"No," she said slowly. "At the Neville. We're casting . . . we're casting *Cymbeline*."

Larry went white, and for a moment Lydia was frightened by his face. He gave a queer little bow, and said breathlessly, "I will telephone you at ten."

He grabbed Lydia's arm and hurried her out into the street. He rushed along at a great pace through the darkness, silent and absorbed. Lydia knew that it meant nothing to him that she was by his side, and that anyone else would have been just as important to him—that he might even have preferred to be alone. Indeed he was alone. He went striding along, his tweed coat flapping behind him, his handsome head flung up to the stars. They went along their usual route to Victoria, down St. James's Street and through St. James's Park. It was nearly dusk now, and the lake was looking misty and romantic with the Admiralty towers in the background, and the trees busy with the chirrup of bird-song. Everything was

magical with the languid loveliness that clothes London's grey facade at night, the ripple of water and soft distances, the lingering whispering lovers. But Larry strode on, without glancing about him until they were in the noisy canyon of Victoria Street. Then he stopped and looked at her, suddenly conscious of her prettiness and the rather wistful expression in her eyes.

"Lydia, what a beast I've been. But—did you hear what she said? Did you hear what she called me? *Iachimo*! And they are casting *Cymbeline*! Of course she can't mean it! She couldn't mean she was giving me the chance of playing opposite her in a production like that! "

"Why not? "

"That's it." He seized her hands exultantly, "Why not? Who else is there to play it? Who should play it? A great name . . . and all the great names are tied up in contracts these days—no one is free. She *does* mean it. I'm sure she means it. This is what I have been waiting for. I knew it would come if only I had the courage to wait."

"Larry. I'm so glad."

"Darling, look, come back with me to my place. You've never been there. Look," he took her shoulders, gently, smiling into her serious face, "Look, you little baby, I promise to be awfully good. But come with me, and we'll sit by the fire, and I'll read the part to you. I want to get home and read it and read it to someone—I'd rather read it to you than anyone else in the world."

A little wave of excitement lifted her heart. She was not shut out any longer. She was with him in this exciting new adventure. The coldness and the foolish little jealousy vanished. She saw now, not the interference with their evening that the meeting with Auntie Mady and Astra had been, but what it meant for an unknown young actor like Larry to be offered, out of the blue, a great part in a famous theatre, playing opposite one of the most exciting actresses of the day.

A little wave of prejudice made her hesitate. If she missed the train she would be very late home—not in until after midnight. She had to get up early to be at the office. But just this once it would not matter. Then she should ring up her mother—she always worried if she were late. Her mouth tightened. There was no reason why she should consider her mother about that sort of thing now. Her mother had a life

of her own, apart from the family, so why should not Lydia? She was twenty-three. She smiled up at Larry with a touch of defiance that he did not understand. It was an unspoken defiance of people, people who hurt you and let you down; defiance to people of more experience, more glamour, with whom she might have to compete.

"Of course," she said breathlessly. "Of course I'll come."

He hailed a passing taxi, and when they were hidden in its small dark world, swept her impetuously into his arms. Lydia tried to respond to his passion, and to the exciting pounding of her own heart, but the memory of that other taxi remained, an ugly little mockery at the back of her mind.

Marte dismissed her taxi at the corner of the road. One reason was that the girls would hear, and she did not want to explain that it was not an extravagance because Andrew had insisted on paying for it. The other reason was that in spite of the weariness that invariably closed down on her at the end of the day, she wanted the quiet walk home through the darkness to try and get things clear in her mind. She wanted to think of Andrew and what he meant to her. If he meant anything, and if the evening had any deep significance beyond a kiss.

There was nothing much in that, it was flattering and reassuring—or, was she trying to deceive herself? There had been nothing light in the hunger of his lips, nor perhaps, in her startled but swift response. Was it a step towards an intimacy she did not really want—that she had unconsciously, all these months, been trying to avoid? She had no patience with women who wanted the comforting glamour of a romantic friendship with a man, and avoided the final issue, giving nothing in return. One had to be a realist. At forty-five one owed it to oneself to be a realist. No use dressing up the thing in frills and rose-coloured glasses. Andrew wanted her. And she—what did she want? There could be no question of marriage—they both know that. They were both married. *Married?*

Walking along through the darkness she gave a grim little smile. He was married to a smart and fashionable wife whom he only met on formal occasions and family festivals. And she was neither bound nor free, neither a widow nor

wife, nothing, nothing, nothing . . . and the years slipping away like a toboggan race. She stopped. This was sheer self-pity. She must be getting old, because it was getting hold of her lately—she despised self-pity. But try how she would she could not face the thought of John, not the thought of him dead in some Pacific sea, nor alive in some palm-ringed island hell. She could not think of it. Of course—she need not see Andrew again. He was too decent and too big to let that affect their business relations. But why should she? Why should she deny herself her womanhood, her right to be admired and loved? Why should she deliberately choose a manless, spinster, celibate life. She was not that kind of woman, she . . .

She stopped in the dark road. In the half-shielded lamp-light at the corner of the road she saw a small group of figures. Boys' voices drawly and un-English. Americans. She heard the high laughter of girls. As she went forward there was some scuffling and shrieking, the sound of a kiss, a glimpse of bright hair against a khaki uniform. Sheer blind anger caught her up in its grip. Not just anger because Bunty could behave like this, but anger at the whole unreasonable man-trap of war.

She walked straight into the middle of the group, tall and lovely and furiously angry. Bunty, pushing back her hair, saw her mother and faltered. Patricia hung back in the shadows.

There was a silence. Bunty began, "Oh, Mother, I . . ."
"Go home," said Marte. "You too, Patricia."

She saw Bunty's eyes glint defiance, and her hands clenched, knowing she would hit her if she answered at that moment. But it was mother, and she was so rarely angry that Bunty was frightened. With a toss of her bright head, and a little whimper of protest she shot off along the road, Patricia following. Two of the boys made off—she could hear their laughter in the shadows of the big house where they were billeted. She could have killed them. One tall, tow-headed, incredibly young, stood his ground.

He said, hesitatingly, in the sudden grave, polite way Americans have, "Ma'am, I'm sorry . . . I didn't think . . ."

"No," she said savagely, "You don't. You never do. People never think until they're too old for it to matter any longer. Girls of fifteen should not be hanging round the

streets at night with soldiers. If I ever see you speaking to my daughter again, I'll go to your officer."

He stiffened at once, resenting her attitude, and she knew she was handling the whole thing badly. That she was taking her own frustration and bewilderment out on these unthinking youngsters. "I'm sorry," she said, "I know. You're a long way from home, there's a war on, and it's not your fault if girls behave badly. "It's just," she fought against the break that almost came into her voice, "it was my girl . . ."

"Ma'am," he said again stiffly, humiliated and sorry, but to her surprise, understanding, "I am sorry. I guess there's nothing else I can say."

She managed to smile. "I guess not. Good-night."

"Good-night, ma'am."

She knew the thin, tall boy's figure stood there watching her until she was out of sight. She went on into the darkness, knowing she had made a mistake. Knowing her anger had merely added an extra fillip of excitement to Bunty's adventuring. Even if that one boy understood there were a hundred others who would not, whom she might never know anything about. Bunty came from a good home . . . She paused. Bunty, alone all day, often all evening. What sort of home was that? She must speak to Andrew about it. Perhaps it would be better for her to leave school, and be in business—perhaps Andrew could make a place for her in the department. That was no use—running to him, relying on him. Tying up the threads she knew ought to break. Besides, Bunty took her school certificate next year, and she ought to stay.

She went into the house, and gave a little shudder as she saw the layer of dust the electric light revealed. Upstairs to her room. The corner of the carpet was still loose. She had been meaning to tack it down for the past three months. She paused outside Bunty's door, hesitated and went in.

Bunty was standing in her slip, hurriedly thrusting something away into her wardrobe. One of Lydia's dresses. There were tears on the bright face, tears, and anger and smeared lipstick. Her heart suddenly melted, remembering how often she had crept up here to tuck Bunty in. Her little girl—her little shining girl. They looked at each other in silence, Bunty longing to throw herself into her mother's arms and

weep, but some hard sense of hostility keeping her head erect and the tears back from her eyes.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," she said suddenly, "There was no need to make me look such a fool. You have your friends."

Marte felt something drain out of her. She just could not go on to-night. She must sleep and she must think. She said slowly, "I'm sorry I was so angry. I can't talk about it now. I'll talk about it to-morrow. To-morrow's Saturday. I'm at home in the afternoon."

"I'm playing hockey," said Bunty stubbornly. "It's the semi-final."

"Oh." Once she and John would have gone together to see that match. She knew that after business, faced with a dozen household jobs, the accounts and the weekend shopping, she would not go. "Oh, well. We'll see. I think perhaps, as I'm away so much, you ought to go away to school."

"*What*—leave Greyfields? I'd rather die!"

"Well," said Marte, "We'll see."

She waited a while, hoping Bunty would kiss her, but Bunty went on undressing, her face set stubbornly, her eyes averted.

"Good-night."

"G'night."

Marte went into her own room and sat down on the bed. John's photograph looked down at her from the mantelpiece. She had not looked at it for months now. When he had just gone away she would talk to it, sentimentally, like a cinema heroine. Now she ignored it. It was a very bad picture of a very good-looking man, catching all his good looks and none of his essential humour or humanity. She looked up at the clock. It was after ten. Lydia was not in. She must have missed the train. She would not start worrying over that now. Lydia was twenty-three. To send Bunty to boarding school would mean more money—she would have to earn more. Lydia did not earn much, and she had to give Robin a small allowance on top of his pay. There was her Admiralty allowance, and that was just about all. To earn more money she would have to speak to Andrew, and that was the last thing she wanted to do. That would just about clinch matters if she started to rely upon him financially, as well as for advice, and comfort, and

affection . . . and yes, just the ordinary pleasant flattery of being wanted that all women desire.

She cold-creamed her face, tied her hair up in a scarf, and climbed into bed. You could not forget those things with the second assistant wafting in from her beauty parlour every other lunch time. She took Pickwick from her side table, and tried to read the trial of Bardell v. Pickwick, but her eyes were weighted with sleep. She woke up some hours later from a harassed dream, a frightening dream in which she walked over soft earth that crumbled beneath her feet. She switched the light on, wondering what had wakened her. Lydia was going upstairs to her room. She glanced at the clock. It was three o'clock in the morning.

"Is that you, Lyddy?" she called.

"Yes, mother."

"It's terribly late—where have you been?"

There was a pause, then Lydia's voice, queer and clear, almost accusing, said lightly, "That's surely my own business. Good-night."

She sat quite still looking at the clock, and then, with an effort of will for the first time at the photograph of John beside it, the first time for so long. A bad picture . . . no little wrinkles or twinkles, no kindness, no wisdom, no courage, no faith. Had he been all that to her? What had he been? Not this blank, good-looking man. She tried to think of him, tried, and panic-stricken could not recall his face.

"John," she said suddenly, "I'm a complete failure . . . on my own."

CHAPTER TWO

MARTE supposed that one day she would get used to coming home on Saturdays to a completely empty house. She always told herself she was used to it, but that was not really true. She went through to the lounge and opened the French windows which gave on to the garden, to let some air into the room, and to call Orlando, the large ginger cat, grateful for his condescending company as he came down the cherry tree, and wound a purring welcome round her legs. A small tabby Delilah who had been luring him from the weedy rosebed, shot over the wall with an indignant squall. She was rather like Bunty, thought Marte. Like all young female things. Flaunting their charms recklessly until the male becomes determined, then running for their lives. She bent and stroked Orlando who did not desert her, having arrived at an age when fish heads, lightly boiled, meant even more than tabby charmers, and Marte had managed to get some plaice on her way home.

She had the afternoon to herself. Bunty would not be home from hockey until tea-time. Robin might, or might not be home for the weekend. Lydia had left for the office that morning with the brief, casual information that she would be "out."

What would she like to do with her afternoon? Well, she would like to spring-clean this room. She would like to take the curtains down, and distemper the cream walls, and have the carpet out on the line in the garden and make it look like a room again. She would like to go through every drawer and cupboard, and everyone's clothes, and she would like to make a cake. She simply had not the energy to do any of these things, but while the kettle boiled for some tea, she took a duster over the lounge, and vacuumed the carpets, and picked some almond blossom from the garden and set it in a vase—she did it in a burst, not exactly of enthusiasm, but in a sort of pity for the big comfortable room which had once been so attractive and welcoming. She had her tea in the kitchen, and a scrambled dried egg and some cheese, sitting on the tall stool she used for ironing and potato peeling, by the draining board. Mrs. Daws, who came in

three times a week to oblige, had left a list of shopping for her. Soap, soap flakes, soda, usual rations, tea nearly finished, ending darkly with, "Get out early, Missis Tredgold, Heatons have *veal* this week."

It was nearly three o'clock now. From past experience Marte knew that by the time she got to Heatons the enticing mirage of veal would have vanished and there would be nothing but pork. She washed up, including Bunty's breakfast things, went upstairs and turned on the taps and bathed, wrapped herself up in a dressing-gown, and settled down on the bed for ten minutes. It was a full hour and a half later when the street door banged, and she awoke to hear Robin's footsteps bounding up the stairs two at a time.

She braced herself for the shock. For eighteen years now, since he had been a toddler of two, Robin had always rushed straight from the desire to the request, believing in shock tactics. Marte found them harder to resist now. "Billy James down the road has roller skates, if I had them too, we could have a bully time." It had been easy then to say, "Wait until your birthday." Now there was no waiting, because you never knew what was round the corner for him. This course was the last lap—after it he would be what he longed to be, and what she dreaded, a fully trained fighter pilot. He had done his initial training in Canada, and soon he would achieve his heart's desire—a Spitfire and real war, pray God it would be over before that time. But even though he was not fighting yet, there was danger, the danger of enthusiasm and lack of experience, and there might not be another chance of giving. She would give him anything, just so that he should stand there in front of her, square and chunky, turned-up nose, bright brown impudent eyes with their curling "horse-lashes", grinning, sweet boy's mouth. She knew she was wrong to hand it all out to him. "Have it all, anything, so long as you stand there alive for me to see . . ." all wrong for Robin whom she had spoiled since he learned the value of his smile.

The footsteps reached the door, and it was thrust open. There he was. What damned silly unreasonable creatures mothers were. Other boys looked just as well in their uniform. After all this time it was idiotic for her heart to lift with pride in him standing there in his uniform with the wings on his breast.

Robin smiled, and she held up a protesting hand. "Don't tell me. Let me guess!"

He came over and sat by her, and gave her one of the large satisfying hugs he always administered when no one was looking. Whatever Robin did, this one thing was lovely between them, this quick depth of affection.

She said, "How long have you got?"

"Only a sleeping out—I have to get back to-morrow night."

"And how's the course?"

"Bound rigid—still on the nursery slope. Still, the Japs won't pack up just yet. Maybe I'll get a crack at them."

"Oh." She sat up, looking at her bedside clock.

"Heavens, look at the time. And I have to do the shopping. Will you be in this evening?"

He shook his head, dark eyes twinkling.

"To-morrow lunch?"

"Possibly."

She swung her feet to the floor. "Go away while I change, or else the shops will be shut. I only meant to rest for ten minutes."

"Mama . . ." he only ever said that when he wanted something. She looked at him, trying not to smile, he was so bonny and sure of himself, and so sure of the humorous affectionate understanding between them.

"What is it?" her tone was threatening.

"A smashing piece, darling, all stream-lined and up in the upper-ten. I've got a date with her for the first time, and I must shoot a line. Little Mama, lend me some money. I swear I'll let you have it back out of my pay. Honestly, I know it's thick, but I won't do it again . . . but just this once, give me a break . . ."

"How much?" she asked cautiously.

"Tenner."

"Wha-at? Five pounds and like it, and back on the dot, or I'll sue you. If your young woman's so wealthy she should feed herself."

"You're a very good type, Mama. I'll get by on three." He took the money, glanced at his reflection in the long mirror with apparent approval, tipping his cap over one eye. "I'll go and glamourise. By the way, Bunty is sulking because I saw her talking to a Yank along the road. I like

Yanks as such, but this one was a poor type—you ought to keep her on a chain, darling.”

He vanished, leaving Myra to scramble into an old suit, and brush her hair before tying it in a scarf and going downstairs. She brushed at the short silver curls as though they had done her a personal injury. She was weak and stupid and sentimental. Other people besides Robin ran up against danger daily. They all had during the blitz, during the flying bombs, during the rocket attacks. He had not even been in a fight yet. She had not thought it necessary for her to present the whole household with money she could ill-afford. Danger was part of war-time life, something to which you simply had to adapt yourself. It would not make Robin a better man nor a more responsible person because she spoiled him. She picked up a cardboard dress box from her bed and went downstairs.

Bunty was in the garden, having apparently forgotten any sulkiness, tossing an old tennis ball up against the back wall, and lobbing it back with a tennis racquet. She was still wearing her gym dress and sweater from hockey, and there was quite a lot of mud about her. Marte stopped inside the window, watching her. She was intense and concentrated, neither grown-up nor child now, a trained moving combination of eye, and speed, and young muscle. The arm swinging long and joyously, and the tall body following through for the crack of the back-hand, bounding further back when the ball came away sharp and straight, curving away like a ballerina when it came high and soft. This was something that never came again—this health, and energy, this beauty—why did they never understand? Why did they want to hurry through it, to exchange it for experience, to climb into the grown-up world of responsibility, passion and care? Why did they never realise that as long as they lived they would never be so free again? Bunty missed the ball which shot off across the shaggy unshaven lawn, and she swore a little, silently to herself, dropped the racquet on the grass, and sat down beside it, shoulders hunched, elbows on her knees, staring moodily into space. Marte opened the door and called to her.

“What?”

“I want you here, something to show you?”

She rose and came in, and Marte pointed to the box.

"I brought these for you to see, from the store. I thought you needed some new clothes for weekends."

"Mummy!" Her eyes shone, and she leaped on the box, and drew out the soft camel hair jersey, the matching skirt, the wedge-heeled shoes in fine tan leather. Her eager hands relaxed, and the things dropped back in the box.

"Don't you like them?"

"Yes, thank you, Mummy," Bunty said flatly. "They're very nice."

Marte put an arm about her shoulder, felt the little unconscious response. After all it was not so long ago that she and Bunty had enjoyed a good cuddle. "What was it you wanted, darling?"

"Well, I thought perhaps a red dress. Or a black one. Nice and tight, and some high-heeled shoes."

"But, darling, when would you wear them? You want something for weekends, not for special occasions. You would find a red dress a bit conspicuous all the time, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I might go somewhere exciting some day. You never know. Besides, Pat and I are learning to dance. We practice to her radio-gram. I might even go to a dance."

Marte ruffled her hair worriedly, "You should be going to dances, but there aren't any dances given these days, except public dance halls, and you're too young for that." Bunty was silent, watching her cautiously, "Though I suppose you might go there with Robin, if he were ever free."

She paused. No use telling the child she would look cheap and showy in a red dress and high-heeled black shoes. Bunty obviously had a glamorous and desirable picture of herself attired thus. She hesitated and then remembered John saying to her, "Look back into your own youth when you want to advise them," and immediately had an absurd memory of herself as a girl, and the store of make-up she kept hidden in the summer-house for use on her way out. She continued tentatively, "I thought you might wear my string of 'cornelians with the jersey—you could wear them double so they would be short and chunky. What was that picture we saw last week . . . the one with the girl with all the hair?"

"Veronica Lake?"

"Ye-es. You're rather her type, you know, Bunts."

The blue eyes showed a sudden deep interest, and encouraged, Marte battled on. "I bought these for you because I thought she looked terrific in that simple jersey and skirt. She made other women seem overdressed," Another pause. Was Buntz seeing herself from a different angle? "Of course, if you really wanted, I could change the shoes to a pair of plain tan walking ones, with a cuban heel. What do you think?"

"Oh, yes. I see what you mean, Mummy. Heels do make a difference. O.K." She held the jersey up against herself, and looked in the mirror, unable to ignore the glowing petal skin, the gilt of her hair that the pastel fawn showed up to perfection. "Of course, I do see what you mean. I suppose Pat does look a bit overdressed in those high black shoes of hers."

Marte felt a breath of victory. Achievement. If she went on like this she might even get round to distempering the lounge one day.

"What are you doing this evening? Shall we go to a movie?"

The vague, cautious air of disinterest clouded Buntz's eyes again.

"Oh, well, I did say I might go down to Pat's. She has some new rhumba records." Buntz felt her face going hot at the half-truth. It was true really—that was all they had planned to do—practise to the gramophone. She could not help it if a crowd of Mrs. Hillman's friends dropped in. Buntz tried to stifle the certainty that Marte would not approve of Mrs. Hillman's friends. They were very, very smart, of course, and they always made a lot of jokes about where they got things from these days. Drink, and clothing coupons, and all the things that the Hillman house seemed full of, and no one else seemed to have.

Mrs. Hillman was a round, bouncing little woman, with very blonde hair which was set in rows and rows of innumerable little curls, and Mr. Hillman, whom no one saw very much, and of whom the rest of the family stood in awe, was a thin, worried looking man with a dark, secret sort of face, and clothes which always looked uncomfortably smart for him. He was something vague in the City, and his one reaction towards his wife and daughter seemed to be to keep away from them as much as possible and give them more money than they could possibly need. This apparently entitled him to

grumble as much as he liked on the rare occasions when he was at home, and absolved him from all home responsibilities. Words heard very frequently in the Hillman house were, "Dad will pay," "Come over this evening, Dad won't be in," or "It's all right so long as Dad doesn't know." To Bunty, entranced with the apparent luxuries and freedoms of the Hillmans, it did not appear that Mr. Hillman, who had always bought his way through life, was also buying the material comforts of family life, because the real ones of trust and affection either scared or evaded him. She never compared him with her own father. He had been different. Nothing to do with buying things. She was sure of that. She knew she was like him to look at, because people often said, "She's exactly like her father." But her memories of him were mixed, vague and vivid—particularly the fishing memory of hot sun, and the smell of grass and damp arms and legs, and the unbearable excitement when she held the landing net and they both turned the flapping silver beauty on to the bank. She supposed she remembered his voice best of all. Like when she broke her arm. "Things that are worth having are worth paying for, Bunty. It's going to hurt. But it's better to have a bad hurt now, and a strong arm later, isn't it?" or "Did you enjoy Mrs. Armstrong's apples, Bunty?" Mrs. Armstrong was an extremely irritable old lady who had then lived next door, now lost in the mists of evacuation. She and Robin and Lyddy had called her "the enemy" in those days. "Well, in that case you'd better go round and tell her how much you enjoyed them, and offer to make payment—you might help her pick the trees, or water the lawn." And afterwards, in the September heat, up the tree, sweating over the work which earlier had been the delightful adventure of "scrumping," he had winked at her over the fence and made her laugh.

She smiled, thinking of him, then caught her mother's eyes, and came back to the immediate present. That was long ago. She was a little girl then. To-night should be fun. There was a whole crowd of people going to Pat's.

She wished the tall fair American called Jim Jevons was coming. He was nice. Even if he were stuffy he was still nice, and maybe if he knew how much she liked him he would not be so stuffy. It had been completely finished so far as he was concerned since that evening mother had seen them. He merely looked at her with cool grey-blue eyes, very light in

his smooth brown thin face, and very very detached, as though he could see right through her. Bunty did not like boys to be detached. It was not exciting. When she and Pat had stopped by the billets this afternoon to talk to Ray, the dark, loose-limbed New Yorker, Jim had come out, thin and gangling, with his silly little cap perched on his blond head, and said, "Get the hell out of here, before I slap your pants."

It had made her feel like one of those scruffy little kids that hang around Americans, begging for chewing gum. She would show him. He need not think that just because mother had ticked her off in front of him that she was not old enough to go out with boys. Anyway the dark boy, Ray, was coming to-night, because Pat had asked him, and Pat's cousin the Flying-Officer who was terribly old—at least twenty-one. Pat was crazy about Ray, but Bunty was not so sure—she did not like the dark familiarity in his eyes. She hoped anyway that Mrs. Hillman's friend, Mrs. Marchmont, was not coming, because she was too old and smart and said things that made all the men laugh, which Bunty did not always understand, and she could dance wonderfully, and all the men seemed to like her. Mother was saying, "You'll be in by ten?"

Ten? Things usually got started about then. Still, she promised.

"And may I wear my new things? And the cornelians?"

"Yes."

"I think I'll keep the wedge heels. I couldn't very well wear my school shoes, could I?"

"Not really," said Marte judiciously, resisting the impulse to point out that they would be much more useful in any case. "Ten o'clock then." She kissed Bunty, noticed her colour, her swift conciliatory hug, and had a momentary qualm of doubt, quickly stifled. It would not do to overdo things with visible anxiety and watchfulness. She had scored a victory with the clothes. "I must go and shop. Get Robin and yourself some tea, darling."

"Why shouldn't Robin get himself some tea?"

"Why not?" agreed Marte lightly, "Ask him."

"Because he's a blinkin' hero," Robin shouted as he came out of the bathroom.

"Some hero. You haven't heard a gun bang yet."

Marte left them wrangling and went off along the road to battle with the shopping. She had left it late, and there was little to be had. Most of the assistants were strangers, and

only very few remained from the days when she had shopped every day in this district. She bought the items on her list, and the rations, including the meat, which was pork, frozen so hard it fell into her basket with a hollow thud, and was overcome with gratitude at a tin of custard powder one assistant had reserved for her. She bought some salad at a fantastic price, her conscience suddenly squirming when she remembered the uncultivated beds and unpruned trees at home. She supposed she ought to do something about that, even if it was only letting some part of it to a gardening neighbour. She tried, and failed to imagine the gay and gallant Robin giving her a hand with the digging.

She examined her purchases, a dismal collection, but she supposed not too bad when one thought of Holland and Greece. At least they had some apples stored, so there would be apple sauce with the pork. She started home, and was angry and surprised to find herself thinking of Andrew, of their evening together yesterday, of the luxurious quiet of the expensive little restaurant where the flawless French cooking concealed wartime shortages. A couple of hours to forget all the small worries, all the make-does, just sitting-back, being a woman, an admired, attractive woman. She glanced at her reflection in a window. The harassed figure in the old suit and gypsy scarf bore no relation at all to the Marte of last night. Had she been sinking into the hidden casual evening life with Andrew lately, and shirking her real problems. Bunty, Robin, Lydia, the home? Would they be any better if she gave it up? She knew that her mind was running away from the real problem—that Andrew was rich, charming and very lonely, and that life, the life where one could stretch and relax, and pamper one's womanhood, was there if she had cared to take it, and the price was not really very high. No one would know but themselves. The children. Lydia and Robin were grown up. Bunty could go to boarding school—the best boarding school in England if Marte wished. A dangerous thought to play with. She wished it did not haunt her so much these days, but sometimes she was so tired.

She stopped at the corner, outside a shabby unpainted house—the only bright thing about it was the brass plate beside the door which read Dr. Ian McNab, M.D., and paused, thinking of Ian's thin kindly face. Surgery time. Of course if she rang the house door bell he would see her privately, but some impulse made her go in and sit with the

patient, shabby group of people in the waiting-room, turning over old magazines, waiting to see the doctor. She looked round her with interest, wondering why she was there.

Robin paid off his taxi and ran up the steps of the Hotel Magnificent. He had wished, as he came along from Victoria, that he had been driving his own car—it would have had to be a very sleek, very wonderful car to do justice to Diane. In fact, when he really thought about it, the war gave him a chance with Diane, because in peace time she would simply *expect* him to have that kind of car, but in war time so few people had cars at all, that it really was not noticeable. The war looked like cracking up at any time now. He probably would not be on ops. before it ended. That was a grim thought. The war had certainly given him a chance—otherwise he could not possibly have met her. His heart constricted painfully when he thought about her. She was so young, not much older than Bunty really. Nineteen. She told him her mother had wangled heaven and earth to get her into some canteen work to keep her out of the forces. Of course she was not suitable for the Services. Robin knew a lot of service girls, and good scouts they all were, but he just could not imagine Diane in the services. It would be like trying to rear an orchid in a sharp March wind. He simply could not imagine her in uniform. He could never imagine her at all when he was away from her, except the shimmer of her fair hair, and the soft sullen droop of her lips.

He glanced round the lounge and saw she was not there, so went across to the reception desk, for Diane was staying at the hotel for a day or two on a shopping jaunt. Normally, while their London house was closed, they lived in a big country house, well out of any danger zone near the A.F.U. where he was stationed. They were at the hotel now because Mrs. Gander said with the end of the war in sight they must think about getting things straight in the town house, and it was so difficult to get anything done.

The receptionist rang Diane's room, but received no reply, so Robin settled himself to wait. He had not expected her to be there. Trelawney, who had introduced them, had taken her out, and said that she had kept him waiting longer than any other girl he had ever known—if she had not been such a smooth job he would not have waited. Trelawney was a

Flight-Lieutenant with a taste for poker and large but irregular supplies of ready cash.

Robin, after some hesitation, ordered himself a drink. It would save money if he did not, but would look more sophisticated if he did. He glanced cautiously round at the people in the lounge. He wondered if they would dine there, and thought if they did he might just about manage it. The Five Bob regulation was one he devoutly hoped would last a long time after the war. But with cocktails and wine, cover charge, tips and taxis, and perhaps a flick after the show he guessed it would blow the five pounds right out of his pocket book. For one bleak moment he thought of saying to Diane, "Look here, Diane, I simply can't afford this. Let's go somewhere in Soho," but his mind shrank from such an attack. It was the first time she had ever been out with him, and he must make some kind of showing, and just then Diane came in through the swing doors.

She was small, and she wore a suit that was the exact yellow-green of a lemon, she wore a white jersey, and white peep-toed shoes, and her shining fair hair fell from a straight centre parting to her shoulders. In her lapel she wore a diamond brooch and a diamond watch glittered at her wrist. Robin felt his five pounds diminish as he watched her approach. Her arms were piled with shopping, and topped by a large bouquet of flowers. She dropped her armful, including some pink chiffon briefs and a black dress, all embarrassingly unwrapped, into a chair, sank into another and picked up the miniature silver-grey French poodle which she held by a lead, and began to coo to it. Robin rose nervously.

"Is he a very tired doggie?" she murmured, "Shopping all day with Momma, and nasty men not giving him any lunch? Poor little Pootzi. Doesn't he like this horrid London, then, my lamb?" After which she looked up under her long dark lashes to see what effect this had on Robin, saw his nervousness and her power directly, and spoke to him for the first time. "Sit down, darling, you clutter the place up. What are you drinking? Get me one. I'm completely shattered with weariness. I've spent all cook's coupons. Look . . ." She lifted the dress of sheer black chiffon and lace. "If you're terribly good and exciting, I might wear this this evening."

In a daze Robin ordered her a drink, and found himself

saying rather foolishly, "And what will cook wear all next year?"

Diane opened wide blue eyes. "Don't tell me you are going to be a prig, darling, because if there is one thing I can't tolerate it's a prig! When I first saw you, Robin, darling, I thought at once—there is a drooly piece, so don't spoil my first impression by lecturing!"

"I'm not . . . I wouldn't . . ." Robin began hastily. Diane looked at the square boy's face, the dark gay eyes, just a little anxious now, and felt happily warm and wonderful. She must not let him know he made her feel like that—there was a look about him that might get bossy if he knew he attracted her. Since Diane had been a child she had learned her approach to life from her mother, and her mother was a great believer in keeping men guessing. She had kept all men guessing except her husband, Andrew Gander, who had guessed correctly, just once, since when she had seen him only on the most formal occasions. But he had allowed her to have complete control of Diane. To Mrs. Gander the war was merely a conspiracy which prevented Diane finishing in Paris.

Diane finished her drink, and draped the chiffon dress and the briefs over Robin's arm, topped them with a pair of shoes, picked up her flowers and the rest of her possessions including Pootzi, and said, "Let's go upstairs."

"Up—upstairs?" Robin said in alarm.

She looked at his horrified face, and her own lit up with mischievous amusement. "Where were you brought up? In the backwoods? Most men would jump at the invitation. Come along."

Robin followed her meekly, very conscious of the amused glances of the bystanders at the procession they made. First Diane, leading the poodle and carrying an enormous bunch of tulips and an armful of shopping, and then himself in the rear with his armful of feminine wear. They proceeded to the lift which was full. Robin felt the colour rising under his collar as they mounted upwards, while Diane was apparently quite oblivious of any sensation she might be causing, carried on an animated conversation with the lift attendant on the merits of various thoroughbred horses who had let one or the other of them down that day, and various other horses who would run on the morrow. Robin was too embarrassed and too infatuated to be analytical, but it did

cross his mind that instead of being irritated by Diane—as they had every right to be for Pootzi was barking at the top of his shrill voice, and the tulips were sticking into a Wing-Commander's eye—everyone smiled at her as though she was a particularly cute and wilful baby. She really was wonderful. Robin was twenty-one. The thought that what is charming in a girl of eighteen is deplorable in a woman of twenty-five never crossed his mind. He considered it was just Diane's own particular magic.

They debouched on to the corridor, Diane calling to the liftman, "Well, you lay off Orientale. I've ridden him in a practice for his owner and he's weak at the knees. He won't last the course. Pootzi! Be quiet. Momma's naughty boy! Robin darling, do take my shoes out of that gentleman's ribs, one can see he hates it . . ." she flashed an exquisite smile at the gentleman in question, and the lift closed on the amused faces and the grinning liftman and they went along the wide corridor. Diane opened a door with her key.

"Come in," she ordered, "Dump those things down there, and you'll find some drinks in the cabinet by the fireplace. Radio over there. Make us something snifty while I get changed."

"Gosh, you've got a suite! "

"Robin," the blue eyes were teasing and adorable; "You didn't think I'd entertain you in my bedroom? Did you? I have a small sense of the proprieties. Now, look, get me a drink."

"I don't see," he said unsteadily, "how you can go on looking like apple blossom on a diet of cocktails."

She was angry immediately. "If you don't like the way I behave don't stay. Go out with someone nice and dull and plain! I don't care! I shan't stay in to-night just because you're not around! "

He caught her hand, "I'm sorry, Diane . . . It's just . . ." he was going to say quite honestly that she came from another world, and in it he found himself floundering like a fish out of water. But her hand in his and her nearness, the shining hair, the young, lovely arrogant face took the words away from him. For a second they forgot pretences, poses, backgrounds, the convention of being rich and smart and gay, and were just like any boy and girl anywhere under the sun. Robin kissed her gently, and at the touch of his curled mouth, suddenly so serious and tender, Diane felt the tears blind

suddenly over her eyes. She backed away, her heart behaving in the most odd manner for a sophisticated and hard-boiled young woman. This was all wrong—getting drooly over a pilot-officer with nothing to recommend him but a pair of bright brown eyes and a profile that curled up like a cheeky child's. Freckles too, and curly dark hair. Too ludicrously infantile! She bent and picked up Pootzi and buried her flushed face in his coat. What did her mother tell her? Plenty of men in the world, and plenty with a great deal more than this one had. Her heart steadied, and she put Pootzi down and picked up the new black dress.

"I won't be long. I'm going to change. Don't forget the drink. I've had an awful hour with father," she went through a door into the bedroom beyond, and he could hear the sound of water gurgling into the bath, and her voice was muffled occasionally as some garment came off over her head. "I went to see him to-day and he's absolutely mid-Victorian. Told me that I didn't need any more money, and that it's time I got into uniform. Imagine anyone's parent being so inhuman. Have you a father?"

"Yes—no. I don't know," said Robin confusedly.

She stuck a fair head round the door, and one shoulder clad in some shiny sort of dressing-gown affair. "Robin, how rude. What do you mean?"

"He was a doctor, went back into the navy. He's been missing in the Pacific for three years."

"Oh," Diane was silent—her sort of vocabulary was inadequate for expressing sympathy. Besides she did not like to talk about that sort of thing. War was beastly—you were always coming up against snags like this. Best not to talk about them. She said weakly, "How poisonous for you."

It seemed to Robin that John, tall with reddish hair and Bunty's eyes, and his mocking three-cornered smile strode through the room, invisible, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, raising ironical brows at the drinks, the poodle and the surrounding luxury. "Yes," he said slowly. "Yes. It's pretty rotten for my mother. He was a good type."

Behind the door Diane pulled on her thin stockings, and tried to think what to say. It was all wrong that the conversation should have taken this painful turn. She preferred to keep it exclusively about herself.

She said, "Robin—I've made a wonderful plan for to-night. We'll have another drink here, and then we'll go on

to the Celeste for dinner. It really is terrific, the best place in town. They've got their old chef back again. Then I thought we might come back here and dance for a while, and then the Bretts asked me to go to a party at their place . . . it's fun because they always play roulette, and I feel wildly lucky to-night."

Robin, listening to her, made hurried calculations. All his steady yeoman ancestry rose to the surface—he was not playing roulette. But even if he did not, and even if they kept the evening down to the minimum, his meagre little fiver was not going to see him through this programme. He looked at himself dubiously in an enormous wall mirror opposite, and wondered what the devil he was doing here. Then he knew quite well that he was here because Diane was here, and because she had simply shot him down in flames. Well, he would go through this evening until his money was spent, and then he would tell her simply that they'd had it, and if she wrote him off, well he would have had it too. But in spite of all his resolutions, his heart failed him when Diane came back into the room.

She was wearing the black dress. It had a full skirt gathered into her tiny waist and her arms and back were tantalisingly white beneath transparent black lace. She had pearls round her little throat and diamonds gleamed on her wrist. She carried a little short sleeved jacket of soft brown fur, circular handbag of the same fur, and a pair of long black gloves. She twisted round on her high heels. "How do I look?"

He was silent—his eyes told her. She put her head on one side, and said, "I think you may kiss me."

Robin did, well and truly, and when he let her go she said hurriedly, "But you're a definite menace, darling . . ." and hurriedly repaired her lipstick, then held out her hand. "Come along . . . let's go."

To his relief Pootzi was left at the hotel. It was as they crossed the lounge that he saw Trelawney through the glass doors of the American bar. He recognised the long lean figure, and the fashionable scruffiness of the uniform, and made his decision quickly.

"Diane, look, I have to make a telephone call. I've just remembered. Will you wait here, darling, just for ten minutes?"

"Alone?"

He flipped the side of her face gently. "Look at another man, and the next one will be a hard one," he threatened, and her lashes dropped swiftly over the light in her eyes, "I'll be like lightning."

He went round and into the American bar by another door, and went over to Trelawney. Trelawney's thin immobile face did not change. His hard, reckless mouth did not smile. He greeted Robin with a casual flip of his hand.

"Hallo, my fledgling, you look very purposeful."

"I am. Look here, Trip, lend me some money. I'll sign my next pay cheque over to you, but I just have to have some more money to-night, or I'll be well and truly pranged."

Trip's cynical eyes went from Robin's face, through the door to where Diane sat looking like a model from one of the more exclusive magazines. "Flying high? Well, what's money? What do you want, Robin?"

"I want ten pounds. Is that all right?"

"At the moment," announced Trip, "I am in the funds, having just been bought off by my maternal uncle, and promised never to darken the ancestral doors again. Ten pounds is yours."

"Good type, Trip. Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention. Cheap evening for Diane. She cost me a whole packet more, and smacked my face at the end of it."

"Oh?" Robin's face was cold and dangerous—it was filthy to have to borrow money from a man like Trip. If he used that tone of voice about her he'd push his ruddy money down his throat. Trip grinned cynically. "Don't look at me like Sir Galahad, or I'll push your face in," his six-foot-two towered above Robin's chunky figure. "She's a nice job—I give you that. Very smooth, very easy on the eye, very, very pure . . . but too expensive. I prefer 'em raw—and cheaper. Enjoy yourself, child, and don't forget I may want that back sudden-like."

"You'll have it," said Robin recklessly, and went back to Diane.

Well, here he was. He owed his mother five pounds, which he should in decency pay her back before the end of the week because he knew she could not afford it. He owed Trip a tenner. So far as he could see he would spend his off-duty hours and his next leave sitting either in his room at the station, or on the garden steps at home contemplating the weedy lawn. Well, there was Diane and the evening was

before him—it was what he had longed and dreamed of for the past three weeks. He sat down beside her and picked up his glass.

“Did you get through?” she asked.

“Yes, I got through all right.”

Something in his voice made her glance at him, a trifle puzzled, and quickly and reassuringly he put his hand on hers. She was only a kid—it wasn't her fault if she had so much money.

Marte had been waiting for about an hour. She could not imagine what had made her go into Ian's waiting-room, but once there a sort of stubbornness possessed her, which would not allow her to go out again. So she sat there, her basket on her knee, and slowly moved from eighth to second place in the queue, if it could be called a queue, which was waiting to see Dr. Ian McNab. She sat there and listened as his patients talked about him. Marte, who had known him since he was eighteen, and thought she knew all about him, learned a good deal. She remembered John had said, “I like this boy, he's sound all through,” and she had only noticed how his great raw wrists had stuck out of the tweed jacket that had been so much too small for him.

“Doesn't look well, does he?” asked a weary-looking little woman.

“Can you wonder at it? The *work* he does. Up half the night, and when he has a day off he goes and spends it in the hospital.”

“Keeps cheerful, though—makes you laugh. Makes it not seem important, however bad it is. When Ethel had her operation she was that scared, and it was his afternoon off, so he went up there and sat by her until she went under. Only one day off, mind you. Shouldn't have pandered to her, I told him. Ought to have got some fresh air for himself.”

“You'll be breaking down one day—that's what I said. Then what shall we all do, I said. ‘Takes more than hard work to kill a Scotsman’ he said!”

Marte was hearing John again in these Cockney voices. Curious how this boy Ian brought John back to her mind. They were so different. John the quiet, cultured product of public school and university, and Ian the hard, raw Scot who had worked his way up from the bottom with scholarships and determination. There was twenty-three years difference in

their ages. Yet they were alike . . . alike in their devotion to their chosen profession, to service and to truth. Both of them would have been horribly embarrassed if one had ever said such a thing to them but nevertheless, it was true. "This boy would make a surgeon," John had said, "He's got the brains, and he's got the hands. But he won't be. He'll slave in general practice. He'll never learn to save himself, or cut himself off from ordinary people's needs and pains. They'll never give him time to acquire skill — only experience, kindness, understanding."

"He was that cut up when he wasn't called up," the weary little woman said, "Mrs. Spry that cleans up here says he's tried every way to get them take him. Good thing for us, doctor, I said, that that chap kicked you on the knee when you were a boy. Reckon he deserves a medal. That made him laugh." She sniffed, and smiled reminiscently.

"Remember the old blitz? Reckon he saved a few lives."

"He ought to have had a medal. Brought my young nephew into the world with the street on fire around them. 'Don't you worry,' he said to my sister, 'Don't you worry — you just help me get that baby here before the fire gets here, that's all you've got to think about!' The fire reached their back fence just as he was born, and the ambulance came at the same time, 'Better call him Incendiary,' the Doctor says, and blow me, she would have done if his father hadn't disliked it."

The weary little woman went into the surgery, and Marte moved up another place. Funny, she could see John now, listening to these women. See him more clearly than she had done for many months. It brought back the old days of private practice, the long hours, the night bell, and reaching out to put the bedside lamp on and seeing John's red head on the pillow beside her. She had always, even after they had been married for years, had a special night-call dressing-gown. He had teased her about it, but she was not going to get up looking a sight to make his coffee before he went off. They would have a cup together by the electric fire before he went, or sometimes after he returned. The quilted satin had been the last one she had had — duck egg blue, with little clusters of roses. Where was it now? John had blue eyes, blue as Bunty's. John knew about her, what he meant to her, and what she meant to him. Andrew Gander had brown eyes and although he was sure of himself, he was gentle and nervous

with her, as though she might fade away, or be scared if he made a false step. She and John had been so sure of their passion for one another—an adult, poignantly passionate, friendly, human understanding. It had been like that when they had been boy and girl, meeting for the first time, marrying early, because they had both known their marriage to be inevitable. She could see John now, finishing his coffee, looking at her with those blue eyes, and could feel her heart lift as he bent to kiss her before he went out. She had not thought about him like this—not for months. Not for years. What was it that had brought him back to her so vividly? She could hear his voice, “This boy McNab, Marte, is a good boy. I’m sorry he’s too old to be Robin’s friend. He has what Robin needs. Robin is too easily loved, Marte. This boy has strength, and real courage.”

Real courage. Limping about all these years, not becoming a real surgeon, barred from becoming a hero, not doing any of the things a young man of his age and physique would naturally want to do. When, finally, it was her turn to go into the consulting room, she was happy to see his tired face light with pleasure at the sight of her. He took both her hands in his, and she knew at once why all those tired, war-weary women came out looking brighter and stronger and encouraged. Not the bottles of pink and brown or yellow medicine that they clutched in their hands. The little bit of his own great strength and vitality that he gave to everyone who needed it. He sat her down in a chair, and took one opposite her.

“Why didn’t you telephone me? I would have come up,” he said.

“Oh, it was not anything much, Ian, and I just had an impulse to come in and see you.”

“Is it your back again?”

She had not thought about anything being wrong with her, so she smiled, and said yes, and knew that he was not in the least deceived. That she had come because she wanted to talk to someone she knew well and could trust. An old and valued friend. This young man of twenty-nine—it was absurd!

“I can’t do much about that back, you know,” he said gently, “It’s up to you to rest it and take care of yourself. You try to do too much.”

It’s up to you. That was true enough. Up to her, he

meant, to keep her hand tight on the reins, and see that her courage and belief was clear and strong. She looked at him appealingly.

"You've always thought I was wrong to take this job, haven't you?"

He smiled at her. "You mustn't trick me into making decisions for you," he said, "I didn't think it was wrong. It was not my business. But I've often wondered how you can afford it."

"Afford it?" she said indignantly, "I could not afford not to do it."

He did not reply, and she knew uncomfortably that he was not speaking of money, but the loss of her home, the loose—unravelling knot of the family that was becoming more and more difficult to control.

"I worry about Robin," she said with sudden petulance in her voice. The weary irritation that she should have these problems to face when she felt so tired, and so disinclined to face them. "I hate to refuse him anything, now he is flying. Of course, I've still some weeks of grace, and it may be some months before he goes on to operational flying. But with these crazy boys you never know. And he doesn't seem to have any sense of responsibility. I sometimes wonder what he'll do when he comes out into civilian life." But her thoughts echoed evilly "*If he comes out into civilian life—If he gets through.*" She shut that thought away quickly.

Ian picked up a pencil and scribbled on his pad.

"Robin's head of the household now—that must be a big responsibility in itself."

Not a hit or a prod—a statement of fact, but it shook her. It altered all her thoughts of him, as though he had suddenly torn a pair of muzzy lensed glasses away from her eyes. Had she ever put the thought of that responsibility into Robin's head. When she had first heard that John was missing, had she accepted Robin's serious, worried, boyish attempts to help her? She remembered back, knowing she had deliberately taken everything on herself, not wanting him to escape from boyhood. He must not be made unhappy by serious or tragic things. He was to leave school so soon to become one of the flying legions of death. She had treated him as a schoolboy, which he was not, and a hero, which he had yet to prove, but never as a responsible grown up man.

She looked resentfully at Ian. "You never let anyone get away with anything, do you?"

He laughed. "You wouldn't really want it? How's Bunty?"

Marte's crossness did not abate. "Too young, too grown-up, too good-looking, boy-mad. I have thought of sending her away to school—it might be possible."

"It would be expensive," his grave eyes did not question how she could meet this considerable extra expense, and she felt a little guilty twinge of conscience, "But it is an idea. There's not much for her at home, and you can't expect her to hang about waiting for you to come."

Whose fault was it if there was not much for her at home? He could have said she was thinking of paying someone to do a job she should do herself.

"Still harping on my job, Ian," she said impatiently, "I tell you I have no choice. I need the money."

"I know. It's a modern complaint. Money, pleasure, happiness—and we can't see that the one can't buy the other two. After this war I'm going to be a tramp, and sleep under a haystack and cook my breakfast in a ditch. I'll hand over all the patients to Dr. John when he returns."

He spoke as though John had gone away for the week-end.

"You're very sure?" she said stiffly.

"Aren't you?"

"Oh, Ian—what do you think I'm wasting your time for? I'm not sure of anything any more—not even myself."

"You haven't mentioned Lyddy," he said. He was still sitting scribbling at the pad, not looking at her, "Is Lyddy the only one who doesn't worry you?"

"No," said Marte quickly, "I don't know much about her, other than that she comes home to sleep, and leaves me her money each week. We're not friends—and I don't know why. I think she is in love . . ." the hand that scribbled the note paused, then went on again, "and of course, when some people are in love they haven't time for anyone else. I'm only guessing. She doesn't tell me, I feel as though I have done something which has destroyed her confidence in me, and I can't think what. That hurts me terribly—because Lyddy was my stand-by. Her friendship made up for other worries, and now we are separated it worries me more than all the rest put together."

He said slowly, looking at the meaningless scribbling he

had made on the pad. "Bunty will attract men in droves as she gets older. She'll be safe enough, once she's through this puppy phase . . . her difficulty will be finding the right man among all the attention and flattery. She is not like Lyddy, who when she gives her heart will give it for ever, with loyalty and faith . . ."

Marte stared at the back of his head as though the thick dark hair was made of glass and she could see right through to the thoughts inside his head. He had not meant to give himself away. *Lydia*? Well, it was certainly an experience to be a mother. She felt so impatient that she could have crashed him, or seized those broad shoulders and given him a good shaking. If he felt like that why did he not tell Lyddy? He was a man among men, a man who had everything. A good brain, a fine body, passion, sincerity, honesty and faith, a man *Lydia* or any woman should be proud to love, and just because he had a stiff knee and no medals, just because *Lydia* was romantic, and intrigued with some fly-by-night mystery man whom none of them had ever met, he might never speak. It was very peculiar that in life the wrong kind of man never had any inhibitions about saying, "I love you, I adore you, my heart is at your feet," while the right kind of man found those things difficult to say unless he was quite convinced his love was wanted. They never realised how much these assurances meant to all women—even to women like herself. She never would have looked at Andrew Gander, for instance, if she had not been convinced of the sincerity of his feeling for her. She thought humorously, "I'm not so sure that was a good idea, at that!"

Aloud she said, "I must go, Ian. Why don't you come and see us? How about Thursday? Come to dinner."

He rose and took her hand eagerly, "May I?"

"Of course," she laughed, and touched his shirt cuff where the edge was frayed, "And collect your mending together. I'll tackle it when I do Robin's."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. But I will come to supper. Thank you."

She went out into the pale evening sunshine feeling curiously rested, and walked up the hill, her mind busy with plans. She would not see Andrew this week—she would come home every evening, and see to things. Their regular meetings which had been so pleasant and luxurious, culminating in that unexpectedly passionate embrace, suddenly seemed quite

wrong. Not just a light, pleasant escape from monotony and duty, a thoughtless and pleasant bit of relaxation, but a disloyalty to herself and her way of life—and to John. Besides, Andrew was too nice. It was not fair to him, for she could see now quite clearly that one of two things must happen if she continued the relationship. Either she would have broken off their friendship sharply, in a panic, or she might have drifted into an intimacy which she would have regretted. She would see him again, she would go out with him again, but not every week, she would not weave him into the pattern of her life. She smiled to herself. "There I go again. Talking as though I were the Mona Lisa. Andrew may be a little hurt, but there are plenty of other women in the world for a man like him." Then she laughed aloud, for even then a little quirk of vanity at the back of her mind was saying, "But not *me*!"

She was passing the estate where the Americans were stationed and recognised the tall, slender-waisted young corporal at the door. There was something about him that set her wondering what he would be doing normally at this time. Studying in his college room, Lounging in a drug store or college campus with boys and girls of his own age, Playing some strenuous, all-absorbing game? He must think it very odd that he should be standing here in this suburban road, with nothing much to do until the day when he would be asked to fight. He looked at her unsmilingly, then seeing the friendliness in her eyes, relented and smiled. Apparently his dignity had scarcely accepted her reprimand of the night before, even if his sensibility had.

Marte said the first thing that came into her head. "Good-evening? Do you play tennis?"

"I certainly do, Ma'am, when there's any place to play."

Marte pointed along the road. "That's my house. The big one that stands back. There's a tennis court there, and stacks of racquets and balls—but we just haven't time to keep it in order. If any of you are interested enough to mow and mark it, and put the net up, you're welcome to play any time you like."

"Thank you, ma'am. We'll be along."

"Any time. Everything's in the shed, and the key of the shed is hung up by the back door. Good-night."

"Good-night."

She went on her way. Jim Jevons, watching her tall

straight back go up the road, gave a little whistle of approval.

It had been such a wonderful afternoon, Lydia thought, that the ending had been doubly disappointing. She had had lunch with Larry, and afterwards gone back to his flat. Since last night, when she had gone there for the first time, it seemed quite natural and inevitable for her to go again. She wondered if all the big steps in life were like that—something exciting, wonderful, frightening, and then once it was accomplished a thing of easy habit. Last night, when he had seen her to the station, kissing her good-bye beneath the great arch of Victoria Station, he had said gently, mockingly, "Was it so very frightening to be in the lion's den?"

It had not been. It had been sheer heaven to sit at his feet in the small, charming room, and listen, while his deep beautiful voice read Iachimo's treacheries. She wished, but did not say, that it was some other part—he seemed to get into the skin of the slippery Italianate villain, proud of his sex and his lady killing, willing to perjure the world to maintain his boast. But she did not say so. It was an actor's job and his gift to get into the skin of the part and afterwards, it had been heaven to make coffee and sit while he sprawled before the fire, his head against her knee, playing with her fingers, talking to her about this wonderful opportunity, about the future. This is how it will be, she had told herself, even if I don't share his triumphs. I shall be the one at home, and always he will come and then he will share them with me.

The flat was only two rooms at the top of an old house in Chelsea, but Larry had persuaded an interior decorator friend of his, "An elderly lady to whom my charm was quite fatal," he had said mockingly, to do them out, simply and spaciouly, in cream. There was a romantic view of the wide grey sweep of Chelsea Reach, and the famous Lots Road Power Station. To Lydia, lying in Larry's arms this blue spring evening, those chimneys were even more romantic than in the innumerable pictures of them. It really was a charming room. Larry could not have an ugly possession about him. He would rather do without—there were plenty of books, and a good Persian carpet and one or two pieces of fine furniture from his mother's home.

"She was glad to get rid of me," he told Lydia, "The mood of the returned hero was beginning to pall, so she told me to take what I liked, and of course I took the best."

There was a wide divan wedged right into the square

window bay, cushions piled at one end, so that one could lie in a sort of suspended eyrie, looking up at the sky, or out at the changing prospect of the river. This afternoon it had been fine, and the evening sky was full of soft golden light, and the river sparkled with silver, and there in this high nest between river and sky, it seemed to Lydia that she had found perfect happiness.

Larry had telephoned her this morning, immediately after he had seen Astra at the theatre, and told her he had been given the part. The whole day since had been a rush of excitement, a touch of glory about meeting him, so excited himself, and so handsome, and so victorious that her heart had melted with joy at his pleasure. He had got what he wanted. He was going to be famous, he was going to work with great people in a great play. She was unspeakably proud of him. She adored him, she sat and watched his dark, mobile, expressive face, and supposed this was what it would be like to be married to a genius. And this was only the beginning. She made tea for him at the flat, and they had it together from a low table near the divan, so they could sit and look out at the river. Then she cleared the tea tray away, and he stretched his slim length on the cushions and pulled her down beside him with her head against his shoulder. He pushed the soft dark curls from her forehead, and laid his lips against its smooth whiteness. Lydia flushed, raising her swift, eager lips to his, yesterday's faint fear and caution breaking down before this new and sweeter intimacy.

"This is like belonging, my sweetheart," he said softly. She clung to him, not answering, passion like an encroaching wave sweeping them together. She could not answer, he had spoken so exactly what was in her own mind. He said, his lips touching the long curve of her throat, his hidden eyes garnering all her beauty, "When will you belong to me, Lydia?"

She turned her head, trembling in his arms, and her eyes lifted to his were troubled, and a little bewildered. He touched the soft lids with his fingers, stroking the lashes down over their quick enquiry, their hint of alarm and accusation, his own dark eyes expressionless, his lips lifting a little mockingly at the corners. "'A lover came, she drooped her eyes, that looked like pansies dipped in dew,'" he quoted lightly, "Why had I to fall in love with you, Lydia, you small, scared, conventional goose? I suppose if you do belong to me it

will have to be with all the dear old paraphernalia of orange blossom and wedding rings! " He laughed, and she laughed with him, half ashamed of the flood of relief and happiness that flooded through her. " The very thought of it sets my teeth on edge." His voice was slightly irritable, " Why human beings can't mate simply and naturally without all that pagan trumpery, I don't know. And I suppose I'll have to agree, because I can't do without you, Lydia."

She said, " Oh, my darling . . ." and her life and herself, and everything she had in her warm young heart was given to him in her voice, so that he drew her closely to him again, with a swift urgency that sent Lydia's sense throbbing with a new and deeper hunger, and roused a response in her that would not be denied. Then, prosaically, the telephone bell rang.

" Oh, hell! " She laughed as he rose and went across to the desk. She sat up, her slim legs curled under her, her hands automatically going to her hair, watching him as he lifted the receiver, his eyes caressing her across the room, the dark lock of hair falling across his forehead. He pulled an impatient face at the telephone.

" Yes? Yes, this is Larry Davidson speaking . . . oh, *hallo* . . ." his eyes left her, the interest deepened in his voice, and went away, concentrating with its direct and challenging personal appeal on the person at the end of the wire.

It seemed to Lydia that a cloud had obscured the sun, but when she looked out at the river, the silver ripples were as bright as ever. She became suddenly self-conscious—her hair was ruffled, her skirt creased. She got to her feet, went to the mirror, looked at herself, not seeing her eager young beauty, seeing with a sense of shame the vulnerable, eager, almost abandoned look about her. She shivered, lit a cigarette, and dropped into a chair. Larry was talking. " This evening? Yes, I'd like to awfully, but . . ." his eyes glanced speculatively at Lydia's still, averted figure, then he said, " Yes, of course. All right. At eight? Good-bye, and thank you. You're being terrifically kind to me, I can't think why? " The voice at the other end apparently told him, for he smiled swiftly, with a complacent hint of triumph, and said, " Oh — *that's* why? Thank you again, and good-bye."

He put the receiver down.

Lydia looked up. " What is it, darling? " she said.

"Lydia, darling, I'm terribly sorry, but I have to go out."

"Out?" she said blankly.

She had herself in hand now, but the chillness persisted. She had the unreasonable, yet shameful feeling of being with a stranger, and it hurt unbearably. She would have done anything at that moment to call back the warmth and desire into his eyes.

"Yes. I did warn you, didn't I, that if I pulled this part off, I would not see so much of you. Not at any rate while we were in rehearsal."

"Oh, yes, I expected it, of course, darling," she hesitated miserably. She had some rights to his time, she thought, unhappily. This was Larry whom she loved, who loved her, whom she was going to marry. "Yes, but you haven't started, and to-night . . ."

"Oh, well, if you feel like that, of course I'll stay." He shrugged moodily, and turned away, his dark eyes cold and bored, "I mustn't make the mistake of thinking you a miracle, because I love you. Women in love are always—possessive . . ." his voice touched on an infinity of experience she did not want to know. "What shall we do? Go out to dinner? Or stay here and make love to each other for the next few hours? With of course," he added savagely, "The conventional amount of self-control!"

"Larry!" She was bitterly hurt. It was as though he had stretched out a ruthless hand and stripped off the last rag of her self-respect. In spite of all her attempts at self-control, the tears blinded her eyes. She turned away quickly, picked her jacket from a chair and put it on. Her lips were stiff, and her voice forced. "Larry—don't speak like that. If you have to go, of course, you have to . . . it's just that I—I didn't expect it, and I was disappointed . . ."

"My darling," he moved across to her swiftly, his arms tenderly about her, "My little sweet," he said remorsefully, "I didn't mean to hurt you. What an inconsiderate brute I am. Of course I won't go."

The rush of relief, the swift wave of returning happiness was overwhelming in contrast with her unhappiness of a moment before. But she moved away from him with a sort of instinct of self-protection, trying to think clearly before her senses were swamped again. "Tell me what it is?" she said, smiling, but the smile was a little tremulous still, "Then I'll tell you whether I think it matters."

"It was that Grey woman," his voice was bored, suggesting someone middle-aged, with dyed hair, and his dark watchful eyes were indifferent, "She's got a dinner-party—most of the cast of *Cymbeline* are there. They've got some idea of holding a preliminary reading before the rehearsals start. She wants me to go over . . ." he added, as though it was supremely unimportant, "There are one or two press people too . . ."

"Oh," Lydia's voice caught on a note of protest. Her mind, the mind that was like her mother's, sharp and humorous and practical asked prosaically, why should she not go too? That part of her, the part that was so much Marte, had seemed to sleep since she had met Larry, sleep unprotestingly, wrapped in rose-coloured dreams. It was most untimely that it should wake now, to ask such a pertinent question. She tried frantically to cover it again, to lull it asleep with romance, surrender and rose-leaves, as though she was afraid of what its sharp criticism might reveal. One should not question happiness, but accept it wholeheartedly as a gift from the gods. Of course she did not expect anything so conventional and ordinary as an engagement from Larry—they would be passionate companions, and then one day marry when the mood took them, happily and without ceremony, like mating birds. But, enquired Marte's daughter, irritatingly pushing the dream covers aside, if they were to be married one day, sooner or later everyone would have to know—unless, of course, he did not want her to come with him among these professional people and thought she would be in the way. Would she always be in his way, then? Because there was no doubt that all his life would lie along these paths. She told herself she was being petty and disloyal. With a man like Larry you had to be different to take a wider view—you had to understand. She said quickly, "Of course you must go, darling. It's most important."

"What will you do?"

"Go home—and catch up with all the things that I've neglected lately."

He looked at her anxiously, with a quick and penitent boyishness that went to her heart. "You're not cross? You're not hurt?"

She managed to smile, but her eyes gave her away. "Of course not, sweetheart."

"Lydia . . . you are the most wonderful Lydia."

His kiss scarcely compensated for her disappointment. All the way home she had fought her tears. All the way home she had sat in the train screwing her gloves into a shapeless ball, and screwing up the courage in her heart, while the grey stretches of suburban London slid past before her misty eyes. It was nice, she told herself fiercely, to have someone you trusted in implicitly, but with Larry it was a different sort of rapture, if you had something lovely, out of the humdrum run of ordinary life, surely it was worth fighting for, and worth suffering for to a great degree. Larry was an artist, and an artist must be an egotist if he was going to succeed. She could not expect him to accept her, who knew so little of his art, into his life all at once. That sort of confidence must come gradually, and could only come with her own patience and understanding and love. But in spite of all her arguments the feeling of defeat was paramount—that and, miserably, the feeling of shame. There was nothing to be ashamed of in being in love—and yet, supposing Astra Grey had not telephoned—supposing the evening had been as she had dreamed it would—four or five delirious hours alone with Larry? The side of her that was Marte, uncompromising and courageous, answered rudely enough, “You’d probably be his mistress by now!” Had his mention of marriage broken down her barriers of caution and made her recklessly responsive—and had he known it would? She felt the colour flame up her cheeks, met the eyes of an unsuspecting fellow passenger, read an entirely imaginary accusation in them, and got up hurriedly and went into the corridor. If Larry loved her he would realise they could not drift on like this. If he wanted to marry her he must love her as she loved him, and no one surely, no man in his senses would ask a woman to marry him just because he desired her . . . there must be something else, something deeper. She was relieved when the train stopped at Greyfields and she could hurry home, but coming into the familiar doorway, into the rather shabby lounge that had held so much of her life the tears came unchecked. Angry rebellious tears of bewilderment and pain and jealousy.

“That Grey woman,” he had said, as though she meant nothing, as though she was a plain, uninteresting woman. But she was not. She was beautiful and brilliant, and not old! It was this that was at the bottom of all her unhappiness.

Why had she to behave like a fool—a stupid, jealous, suspicious fool?

“Lydia, darling—what is it?”

She looked up angrily into Marte’s anxious face, resisted the inclination to put her head on that comforting shoulder, and sob the whole story out. She fought back her tears, dabbing her eyes furiously, fighting for her calm.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Oh, can’t I even cry in this house without someone poking their noses in!”

“But, darling,” Marte’s concerned voice had a smile at the back of it, which at the moment was peculiarly maddening. She would not smile if she knew. “But darling—I would like to help you. I know I’ve no right to pry . . . I just thought you might like to tell me.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just . . . just fed up with everything. That’s all.”

Marte sighed. She supposed it was this new young man. But Lydia was not the type to indulge in such a passion of hopeless tears for nothing. She said mildly, “You used to talk to me, Lydia.”

Lydia had her tears under control. Her anger and disappointment found a new vent.

“I’m grown up now, mother. If I don’t talk to you, whose fault is that?”

“Not mine, I hope,” Marte’s face was dismayed, “I’m sure you know that.”

“I don’t know anything any more. I don’t trust anyone any more. If my life doesn’t go right, it’s my own fault, and I won’t whine to other people about it. I don’t know anything about your life—or your friends.”

“I have no friends you don’t know,” something in Lydia’s look caught her attention, puzzled her a little, “It’s true—except business friends. If you won’t tell me, I can’t help you.”

“Except business friends,” Lydia thought cynically, “whom you go out to dinner with several nights a week, not women friends . . . the taxi sailed past again, the broad shoulders obscuring Marte as they bent above her.”

“Let’s not talk about it any more, shall we? I’m going to bed.”

She averted her tear-stained face, and went out of the room.

Marte sat down, all the weariness of the day closing down on her. She could of course telephone Mady, and ask her

about this young man—but that would be spying. It would be mean. In any case, knowing what an unconscionable gossip Mady was, if there were anything she knew she would have telephoned her long ago. But of course Lydia would come to her for help if she were in any trouble . . . the word with its varied meanings startled her. Of course Lydia would come to her for advice if she were unhappy or troubled, or bewildered. But would she? And what on earth was it that she had done that Lydia did not trust her any more? The thought of Andrew Gander did not even cross her mind.

She heard the front door bell ring and went to answer it—her heart panicked when she saw the telegram, thinking of Robin, until she remembered he was home on leave, probably dancing the evening away somewhere in town.

She tore it open, and read the message. "Safe and well. Thanks to the Yanks. Soon be home. Love to all. Father."

Automatically she gave the boy a shilling, and went back into the sitting room and sat down. She felt quite numb. *John*. He was alive and coming home. She could suddenly feel his presence there with her as though he were standing by her side. She looked at the grubby marks on the cream wall opposite, and thought—"now I shall have to get round to cleaning this place up before he comes back." And suddenly she did not want him back. "Not yet," she thought frantically. There was so much more than that grubby mark on the wall to be cleaned up. "There's so much to be done. There's so much I've let go. Don't come back—just yet, John." The clock struck ten and she realised that Bunty was not yet home.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS half-past five. Bunty and Pat stood at the corner of the road kicking their heels against the kerb and glowering a little. There had been a bickering and there were the makings of a row. Pat looked up at Bunty's golden and rose beauty with lowering dark eyes, and her spoiled, rather mean little mouth tightened. If Bunty had attained superiority in school, out of school she had been able to put Pat in her place. She went to so many places Bunty could not afford, or would not be allowed to go to, and she had so many grown-up friends, and grown-up clothes. The impact, last week-end, of Bunty's new and exquisitely tasteful outfit, had been a shock. It was she who had, rather patronisingly, offered to teach Bunty to dance—and it was distinctly annoying to find that everyone of the crowd of boys who came to the Hillman house had been unflatteringly eager to relieve her of that tuition. It had been even more irritating for she had thought that Bunty being an athlete might be a little clumsy on the dance floor, to find she took to rhythm like a jazz-minded goddess. Well, there were some things she could not do. There was this new excitement of the night-club, for instance. Mrs. Tredgold would never hear of that. But just now they were talking of Ray Manfred.

"You know," Pat said with the starkness of a tragedy queen. "that I'm mad about him. Why don't you lay off him, Bunty?"

Bunty sang a few bars of "It's Love, Love, Love," bumping her narrow hips to the rumba rhythm, and regarded Pat with dispassionate blue eyes. She was feeling pretty good this afternoon, and inclined to be disinterested in Pat and Pat's interests. Two exciting things had happened at school—she had been picked as captain of the tennis team, and she had been cast as Rosalind for the midsummer school production next term. Her mind had been caught in the net of school activities, and she only listened to Pat with half-an-ear. It had occurred to her in a flame of ambition, that if she passed her school certificate well and Cynthia Anson left at Christmas that next year she might . . . she *might* even be head girl. The Piglet had spoken to her about

out-of-school irresponsibility holding her back. That meant boys. It was idiotic for Pat to say that the goody-goodies all had faces like the backs of omnibuses, because Cynthia was dashed good-looking, and a pretty good type. Of course it was crashingly silly for the Piglet to talk about "bad influences" as though Pat were a menace. Pat, she considered loftily, could not influence her to do anything. She regarded her friend with loyalty, but with a sympathetic superiority, because there was no doubt that Pat was a drip at school both at lessons and games, and that she did not get on well with the other girls.

"With your looks and talents, Margaret," the Piglet had said, "You exert a considerable influence over the junior school—don't misuse it."

That, she supposed was a hint. She wondered what they would think about it at home. Probably nothing at all, Lydia was too much in love to care—red-eyed every morning, tight-lipped and pale every night. Robin was too worried, and too hard-up. Mother would be glad—if only she wasn't always too busy! If father were only here . . . she hurriedly stopped thinking about that, and answered Pat.

"Lay off him? Why doesn't he lay off me!" she took a tennis ball out of her pocket, and bounced it against the wall, reaching out a long certain hand to scoop it up again, her eye following and checking its break from the uneven surface. "I think you're a drip, Pat. He's obviously a first-class wolf."

"You're scared of him," taunted Pat.

"I am not!"

"You are then. You like goodies like Jim Jevons."

Bunty crimsoned. "Jim's all right. He's cheesed off, because mother butted in."

"It didn't put Ray off, did it?"

"A Sherman tank couldn't put him off," said Bunty coldly.

"Oh," said Pat savagely, "You show off, don't you. Just because you can play tennis. You're not so mighty. Listen, I'm going to a night-club!"

Bunty nearly missed the ball, and turned wide-eyed on Pat.

"In London?" she gasped—"In the West End?"

"Well, not exactly," Pat said, "As a matter of fact it's near here."

"A night-club in Greyfields!" Bunty said scornfully,

"Don't give me that jive, baby." Their speech, if nothing else, was strongly influenced by the American invasion.

"It is! Mother and Lucy Marchmont went last night with a whole crowd. They didn't get home until five, and Dad was terribly wild, because Mother was so sleepy at breakfast and burned the toast. I heard Mother talking about it to Lucy on the 'phone, and they had a wonderful time. I'm going to get her to take me—and if she won't I shall go with Ray."

"Oh."

"Why don't you come too? If I ask Ray to bring another fellow? But I guess you'd be scared."

Bunty was thoughtful. A grown-up place, exciting and mysterious, and wicked. She would not be scared if Jim would come. Seeing her hesitation, Pat leaped in.

"Look, if I make a date, will you come? Go on, be a sport. I can't go by myself. I'll lend you a dress, Bunty . . . go on, and I'll ask Ray . . ."

"All right . . . we'll see . . ."

She said good-bye hurriedly to Pat and ran off home, wishing that she had not agreed. That was the worst of a dare . . . you felt such a drip if you didn't take it up. Pat had taken away the joy of her triumphant day, because for all Pat's talk about not going without her if she *really* wanted to go, and made herself difficult enough at home, her mother would take her. Bunty knew that by past experience. Pat had acquired a subtle means of extracting treats from her mother, by the simple expedient of threatening to tell her father anything untoward that went on in the house. And if she did go she would wave it over Bunty's head for months to come.

Bunty skidded round into the drive and went racing and whistling through towards the back-garden, pulling up short with astonishment at the unexpected sight of the wide tennis lawn at the back, newly mowed, and rather brown with neglect. A tall, slim, khaki clad figure carefully and laboriously adjusting the tennis net came into view. She stood staring, surprised, interested. Her first reaction was to tear indoors and get out of her school clothes into something more attractive, but then she knew it was too late. She had been seen. Jim raised a hand in laconic greeting, and drew on the net, tightening it. It had several holes in it, but it was still a tennis net. Jim regarded it critically, and Bunty

immediately threw her satchel and school hat through the sitting-room window and approached. He glanced at her slowly, and smiled. He had been working hard all afternoon and the little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He raised the back of his hand and wiped it, the blond hair of his brows and lashes glinting in the sunlight.

"Hallo," said Bunty cautiously.

"Hallo to you," he nodded towards the court, "Do you play?"

"Slightly," said Bunty smugly. "Are you going to mark it, too?"

"If I get time."

"Did Mummy ask you to come?"

"Yes."

"You really did want to see me, then?"

He looked at her languidly, "No, I wanted to play tennis, and your mother said I could. She's an awful nice person."

"Oh."

He bent down over the marker, and began to scrape the caked mud and chalk from the wheels with his penknife, and Bunty provocatively tweaked the back of his blond head. He jerked it irritably, as though a gnat were irritating him, so she did it again, and the temper rose in his eyes as he caught her wrist. She stood smiling and excited, waiting for the next move, but he dropped her wrist quickly, his eyes still angry, and went on with his work. She flounced away and sat down near him. This was scarcely the mood in which to broach the subject of the night-club. She contented herself by picking daisy heads and throwing them at him, unbearably annoyed by the concentrated business of his fingers, and the indifferent back of his head.

"When you grow up," she said acidly, "I should think you'll be a school-master."

"Yeah?" the penknife whittled busily, he picked up the oil can and began to oil the wheel. "Anyway I'll grow up."

Bunty's eyes glinted. "You think you're pretty clever! I'll bet you haven't done any real grown-up things . . . You're not like the other boys. I bet you've never been to a night-club."

"That's not being grown-up, babe," Jim said laconically, "That's arrested development."

He rose, pushed the marker to see if it ran smoothly, and looked at it, said, "I'll not have time to do that to-night,"

then unexpectedly, "You aren't thinking of going night-clubbing, are you?"

"Yes, I mean no . . ." the tell-tale colour ran up under Bunty's clear skin, and she said defensively, "How could I go to a night-club? Who would I go with?"

"That's what I'm wondering," said Jim. "Who?"

They stood looking at each other with sudden enmity. Bunty knowing she had given herself away, Jim, knowing the club which recently had opened in the district by reputation and hearsay, hating her for putting him in a spot. If Bunty really meant to go he knew he should tell Marte, but he knew also he could not sneak on Bunty. He opened his mouth with the idea of giving her a lecture on the subject, when Ray came through the side gate, dark, lithe, swaggering. His bold eyes at once took in the fact that they were either quarrelling or on the verge of a quarrel. He dropped down by Bunty, appreciating her fairness and her glinting strength, and said, "Hi-ya, everyone!"

Bunty stood up, eyes dangerous, mouth sulky, and said, "Oh, Jim's being a wet-blanket as usual . . . come on, I'll take you on." She picked up a racquet and went on to the court, and Ray followed, protesting that he was better at indoor sports.

Jim stood watching them play, or rather watching Bunty make Ray run all over the court, and Marte came out of the house and stood beside him. He smiled and said, "She can certainly play."

"I think it's a little off that you should do all the work," said Marte, "And other people take advantage of it."

"Someone has to do the straightening out," he said seriously. "I'll get a game later."

Marte stood for a moment watching, watching the dark boy losing his self-confidence and becoming visibly annoyed about being defeated. Her mind was in a turmoil of indecision, wishing she had told the children that John was coming back, yet feeling now that she had let the moment slide, as though she were under some compulsion not to tell them—yet! She looked at Ray with misgiving, he seemed to represent everything she disliked about the restless present. She did not like him. She did not like his dark physical insistence, she did not like his lack of grace when he was outplayed, she did not like his hands, straying to Bunty's arms or shoulders when there were balls to be fetched or

searched for in the shrubbery, and was amused at her relief to see her youngest twitch impatiently away. Bunty playing tennis was very different from Bunty as a budding woman experimenting with that great mystery, man.

She said, "You'll stay to supper, Jim? We will all be home to-night, and a friend of ours, Dr. McNab, is coming?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Tredgold, I'd like to."

They finished the set and walked towards the house, Ray saying, "I guess we'd better get along, Jim."

Marte said gravely, "Jim's staying to supper," and courtesy made her add, "Perhaps you would care to stay too."

Ray looked round with his dark, impudent eyes, and shook his head, "I'm sorry, I have a date. Thank you. See me to the gate, honey?"

Bunty looked from her mother to Jim. She did not want to go but she hoped it would annoy Jim if she did. She said ungraciously, "All right then," and they went off together towards the gate.

Lydia stood at the window looking down on the scene, her arms folded tightly across her breast. She felt she must hold herself tightly because her whole body seemed to ache with pain, and her whole mind was dazed with longing. She had not heard from Larry since last Saturday. Five days. In the three months she had known him he had called her up every day. She knew that when he was working she would not see so much of him, but this silence was unendurable. She sat on the chintz covered ottoman, her long slim legs curled up beneath her, her hot forehead resting on the glass, her dry, bitter eyes looking at the scene beneath her. She supposed these young Americans were part of some campaign to keep Bunty at home. Stupid, she thought cynically, to try and protect Bunty. Let her go out, and get hurt, and get hard so she never felt like this. She put her hands over her eyes. Surely there was some time, some little minute of the day that he could spare for her? Through Sunday and Monday she had waited hoping, but on Tuesday she had buried her pride and telephoned the flat, and the theatre. The telephone at the flat gave back no answer, but went on ringing wearily in her ears—then at the theatre she was told, "Mr. Davidson is on the stage at the moment." She had left a message, thinking surely he would call her now, but no message came.

She got up swiftly, as though through the swift impatience

of the movement she would turn her mind to a different thought, and walked up and down the room. How could he hurt her like this? Her mind searched frantically over their last meeting for anything she might have said and done to hurt him, wondering with her cheeks flushing whether she had been too eager to love him, or whether perhaps he was tired of her caution, and what he called her suburban reserve.

She was at the window again now. The dark American had gone, the young fair one was playing tennis now—with Ian. She stood at the window watching. Ian was very tall, and strong—it was extraordinary how quickly he moved, and how he kept his opponent running—you could not pity him because of that lame knee. She remembered how she had laughed at him, because she knew he liked her, and she was ashamed of laughing. It gave her now, in the midst of her distress, a sudden feeling of pride that he should admire her. Heavens, she was only twenty-four, and there was no need for her to mope up in her room like this. Where was her pride . . . where *was* her pride? She had no pride . . . nothing . . . With a sort of fierce anger in her heart she washed, changed into a cool summery dress, and went down to help Marte.

Marte, standing before the oven basting the roast rabbit, looked up as Lydia came in, saw the tightness about her mouth, the stifled unhappiness in the deep blue eyes, and looked away again. She had been hoping to see Lydia happier, and if not happier at least tell her the cause of her unhappiness, not go deeper and deeper into this lonely despair. Everything about her, the crisp red dress, her quick movements, the colour on her white cheeks had a sort of brittle defiance about it, as though she was silently daring her mother to ask. Marte shut the oven door and stood upright. In a large blue overall and her hair rather on end she looked completely happy—she adored cooking but admitted to not liking the clearing up afterwards.

“What’s the feast?” asked Lydia.

“Roast rabbit, roast potatoes, spinach, and lemon meringue pie.”

“Meringue?” repeated Lydia, startled for a moment out of her self-absorbed unhappiness.

“Meringue. The breakfast eggs. I was going to break it to you and Bunty, but after all it’s not often we have Ian to dinner.”

"Oh."

"You're too smart for kitchen work—lay the table for me, there's an angel."

"Just as you like."

She went into the dining-room, and saw that her mother had dusted it, and there were flowers in the pale dove-grey Chinese bowl in the centre of the big round mahogany table. She stood a little puzzled, realising the effort Marte had made to make this evening a success, and felt a strange little lump in her throat, as though Marte had put out an appealing hand to her, and her mind went back to the time before the war when Marte had loved her home so deeply, and cared for it so well. She took the cream lace mats out of the drawer where they had lain for many months, because the three of them lived almost exclusively in the kitchen these days, and as though she recognised some desire in her mother, and in the house, began to set the table carefully, as though for a very special occasion, with the old silver that had belonged to her father's family, and the ruby glass, and went into the garden for some trails of budding vine leaves to lay across the polished wood. As she stood back criticising her handiwork, Ian came in, and for a moment before he spoke, she was acutely conscious of his tall figure, standing in the doorway, watching her.

She stood by the table, her fingers just resting on the polished edge, not conscious of the picture she made, with her dark softly curling hair, her white skin, and the red dress reflected hazily in the polished surface of the table. But she was conscious of him—it was somehow, knowing him so long, knowing how much he liked her, she felt as though he could see right into her heart, and read all the turmoil and distress there. She looked up sharply, and was relieved and surprised to look up and find it was only Ian standing there, huge and shabby, his grey eyes smiling and kind. The warmth that flooded her nearly brought the tears to her eyes, it was such a relief from the strain and pain of the last few days. She stood smiling up at him, incredibly touched by the fact that he should mean so much to her—home, and all the old things that she seemed to have lost lately.

"I believe you're glad to see me," Ian said.

"I am . . . I . . ." she could not tell him how or why, but said inadequately, "You don't change, do you Ian?"

"What else has changed then, Lyddy?"

"Oh, everything . . ."

"Yourself too?"

She glanced up grave-eyed, knowing what he said was true.

"Myself more than anyone, I think, Ian."

"Why?" he asked.

She wanted to tell him—she wanted to tell someone terribly. It seemed as though she could not bear the pain alone another moment. He did not move, but she felt as though he put out a hand and touched her. He said, "Who has been hurting you, Lyddy?" and she moved blindly towards him, and he reached out a long arm and caught her hand. She stood near him, her hand on his arm, she could feel the hard smoothness of the muscle beneath the rough tweed. Although he did not touch her, apart from his light hold on her hand, she felt encircled and protected, and not on her own any more. She put her forehead down swiftly against his breast, and felt, as so many weary patients had felt, the succour of his strength, the depths of his patience and understanding.

"Ian," she said. "You're like a great tree, immovable and strong and enduring."

He laughed. "Trees are sometimes struck by lightning."

She looked up seriously. "You are laughing at me—or trying to flirt?"

"Not flirt."

"No . . . of course not. Ian—when I met you last week in London, I was in a silly, happy mood, and I was probably very rude and flippant. . ."

"I don't mind a bit if you laugh at me, Lyddy."

"No . . . of course you wouldn't." Why should he? It was only people whose dignity was an acquired thing, with a veneer that easily chipped to show the cheapness underneath who were afraid of laughter. She turned towards him, a flood of hidden, crushed words rising in her heart, she would have told him all her trouble and heart-ache, and asked his advice, but Marte called from the kitchen.

"Lydia—tell the others to come, supper is ready."

"All right, mother."

She moved towards the garden door, but he was quicker.

"Lyddy, will you come out with me?"

Supposing she promised and Larry telephoned. Why should Larry telephone? It was nearly a week since she had heard from him. She could spare one evening for her friend. Larry could not leave her like this and then expect to find her

waiting there for him when he chose to return and pick her up again. The pain that followed that thought killed her defiance—he would expect that, and he was right . . . she was there waiting, resentful, perhaps, but too much in love to question him. But she would see Ian—he at any rate would understand, and not hate her if she had to put him off.

“When, Ian?”

“Next Thursday—it’s my only free day.”

“Next Thursday. Outside the office, at six.”

“I’ll be there.”

He looked as though she had given him a present.

She went into the garden and called the others. Robin had arrived and was talking to Jim about “Air bumps and circuits” a technicology she had never been able to grasp, but which apparently interested both Bunty and Jim. He paused as she came up to tell them that dinner was ready. Marte took the head of the table, and looked round at the circle of young faces—it was the first time for many months that they had been gathered together like that. Only John was missing—she wondered if she had avoided such gatherings because his absence was noticeable. Now, of course, was the time to tell them all—not that their time of anxious waiting was over, because that had been over long ago, but that the accepted loss was not true. She put her hands on the edge of the table, to rise and tell them, and as she did so met Lydia’s eyes, cool, not very friendly. She turned and looked at Robin. Jim was speaking to him, and he was pretending to listen, but he was preoccupied, his cheeky boyish face was clouded and grave. She remembered that he had not returned the money she had lent him, and indeed had made no mention of it. If she knew anything about Robin, and she knew a good deal, that expression on his extremely attractive face denoted the lack of money, and far-reaching plans to wangle some. She looked at Bunty, and thought of that fast little person Pat Hillman who seemed to have such an effect on her and of the dark, swaggering Ray. She did not rise, and she did not speak.

It was Ian who said quickly, “What were you going to say, Mrs. Tredgold?”

Her dark eyes twinkled—that young man was too observant by half.

“I was going to say,” she said untruthfully, “That I would like to distemper the lounge.”

The five faces round the table looked across at her with surprise as though she had said something slightly eccentric.

"Well," said Robin absently, "Why don't you?"

"Because the room would have to be cleared completely, carpets taken up, curtains down, furniture moved into the middle, books, vases, pictures—I am never here at the same time as Mrs. Daws, and I really can't tackle it alone."

It was Jim Jevons who said gravely, and with Yankee thoroughness and directness, "Why don't we do it to-night? If we set to after supper, I guess we could easily clear it this evening."

A low whistle cut through the air, and Bunty hurriedly pushed up the window of her small room over the garage, and said warningly, "Shhh."

Ray's voice, eager and complaining, came up out of the darkness. "Say—how come you stood me up, babe? I waited at the corner like we said for over an hour."

She answered truthfully, "I forgot, Ray. We had a lot of fun."

"Yeah? At what?"

It occurred to her that clearing out the lounge would not sound fun to Ray—he preferred more sophisticated pleasures. But it had been fun. Ray's whispered invitation to slip out and meet him had been completely forgotten. They had cleared the whole room, leaving the curtains and radio until last, and Marte had brought them some coffee in, and they had danced in the empty room. Jim could dance, she thought reminiscently, springy and light, cool, funny with his lazy-voiced, lightning wit that had set them all laughing, even solemn old Ian. Lydia had been quiet, but she had looked lovely. Great dark rings under her eyes, like a tragedy queen. She wished Ray would go away. She was sleepy, and he bored her—she thought with the complete sincerity of youth, he bored her rigid except when he tried to make love to her, and that was exciting. She stifled a yawn.

Ray, older than she thought, and not used to being yawned at said eagerly, "Bunty—you know that club, The Crystal Club, that Pat told you about. Would you like to come with me?"

"Really?" said Bunty eagerly. The moonlight, creeping through the leaves of the trees lit her face, her hair hanging loosely about it in the moonlight. "Bunty," Ray whispered

hoarsely, "You know I'm crazy about you . . . come down . . . just for a minute . . ."

"Aw, yaw. . ." Bunty yawned widely, an indifferent Juliet, healthy weariness making her quite indifferent to his eagerness.

"Aw, I can't Ray . . . I'm just too tired. 'Bye now.'" She shut the window and tumbled into bed.

Robin lay on his bed, staring into the blackness. He had enjoyed it awfully to-night. That Yank was a pretty good type and so was old Ian. He tried to imagine Diane helping the furniture removing party and quite failed. Diane would not know anything about spring cleaning. In her life you went to a hotel on the coast, and left the servants to cope. She had come back home, a mile or two away from the station. She had invited him over to the big, luxurious house, with the river curving round its lawns. He had met her mother. Her mother did not approve. "Hatchet-faced old witch," Robin thought, rubbing his curly hair worriedly in the darkness. He had seen Diane every evening—he had not paid any of the money he owed, and he had borrowed more money from Trelawney. Trelawney was playing a lot of poker, and taking a lot of money . . . so he Robin, might just as well leave it, because his luck lasted as long as Trelawney's. Once Trelawney's luck turned, he would have to find that cash. Forty pounds—and five he owed mother. And he had landed that crate with a bump to-day, as though he had never taken a kite up before, and that gong-collector who was instructing would see he had it, if he did that again.

Diane had said, "We might get married, Robin . . ." and she meant it. Of course he wanted to marry her. He wanted to terribly, but not just because her mother had told her not to see him again. And though he hated to admit to youth, they weren't old enough—in any case there was Diane with bags of cash, used to having rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, and he, if this war finished to-morrow, with no civvy training, and not even a job in sight. She just did not realise things. That party he had taken her to, and the Lido Club—he could not afford it. He had told her he could not go, and then she had cried, and looked about two, and said he must go because she had something dreadful to tell him.

That was when she had told him her mother had forbidden her to see him again. They had clung desperately together then. Babes in the wood, he thought, only he was rapidly out-

growing the babe stage now. And her answer had been, "We could get married, Robin." Could—he couldn't even keep that poodle of hers! If he flopped the course! If Trelawney started to lose, which by the law of averages, he must!

Robin turned and tossed, and finally found a small chiffon handkerchief, smelling clean and sharp of gardenia, stuck in his pocket and fell asleep with his blunt nose buried in it, dreaming of Diane's shining hair.

Marte lay wishing she had an address from John so she could write, there was so much she wanted to say. To say? Perhaps to warn him, hoping he was not expecting too much from them.

Lydia lay awake all night, the tears slowly escaping and soaking into her pillow. It was only just before dawn that she managed an hour's troubled slumber. There was no post, there was no message again that day. She sat at her desk, working like an automaton, her mind and heart numb and dead.

Thursday dragged round—it seemed to Lydia that time had never passed so slowly. It seemed to her that each agonising minute of each agonising day dragged unbearably. It seemed to her that she separated herself into two . . . the one girl who got up, and went to the office, and worked through the day like an automaton, and came home, and actually helped Marte work at the lounge . . . and herself, herself who had nothing to do with these things, but waited, and waited, hungry for a word, a message or a glance, as though the very reason for living had been taken away. She did not notice her own almost shocked self-absorption. She did not know that sometimes, in the evening, wielding her paint-brush while Bunty and Jim played tennis, or came in to help, that Marte would speak to her, and she would continue with her work not hearing. The telephone was a nightmare to her both in the office and at home, she wished she could stifle it—every time it rang her heart lifted with a desperate hope, that knew, before it was answered, the futility of hoping.

Thursday—in the morning there was a telephone message for her at the office, and she went to answer it with a pounding, fearful heart. But it was Ian's deep voice that spoke to her.

"I thought I'd remind you about this evening."

She had forgotten—or rather she had not forgotten, but her mind had been so desperately concentrated on one object, that the thought of her meeting with Ian had not crossed her

mind. But with a new perception, and understanding of the feelings of other people, she said quickly, "I had not forgotten, Ian—I'm looking forward to seeing you."

There was a touch of amusement in his voice, as he said, "Where are we to meet then?"

For the first time for many days she laughed, quickly and naturally. "You can't catch me like that, Ian McNab. Outside the office at six."

"All right, I'll be there."

He was there, waiting for her, standing very tall and broad and thin in the middle of the homeward-bound crowd, like a rock with a torrent pouring away at each side. He saw her at once and came to her side, and she noticed that he was not wearing his usual shabby tweeds but a dark well-cut suit, and a new and very smart shirt, and this little courtesy touched her poignantly. He had so many people to think about that he never thought about himself, and now he had done it to please her. It made her angry because he had no one to look after him and see to these things for him. And she was ashamed because she had still her old suit on, and had only just gone through the usual cleaning up process before going home, instead of the long and careful preparation she would make for an evening with Larry.

"Why, Ian?" she said, "You put me to shame, you look so smart."

He squinted down at himself comically, and said, "I know you're very particular."

She had an impulse to hug him, the enormous grave creature, behaving like a boy to please her. She felt like a sufferer from a painful illness feels when morphia creeps through the veins and cradles the nerves, and in contrast everything seems light and gay. For the first time for twelve days she forgot Larry, the agony of loneliness and pain and anxiety, and laughed delightedly. Ian turned to her eagerly and took her arm, triumphant to see the numb misery go from her face at last. He had seen her these past two weeks, passing the surgery in mornings, and again when she returned in the evenings—he knew her time to a minute and nearly always contrived to be there. He knew that for the past two weeks she had not been out in the evening, he knew with a doctor's professional eye that she had lost weight, that she had lost colour, and he knew with his own heart her unhappiness, and felt her pain in his own heart. He felt

the shadow lift as the lovely young face smiled up at him, and his heart raced as her hand went spontaneously to his arm. He took it and tucked it under his, and called a taxi.

"But where are we going, Ian?"

"I have booked a table for us at the Cossack."

"But, Ian, that is very new and smart and expensive. I'm not dressed for it. You should have warned me."

"You look lovely enough for—Buckingham Palace or Hollywood," he said with sudden extravagance.

"But how did you ever hear of it?"

"I read about it in the papers," he told her frankly, "I thought this is a special occasion. The first time Lydia has been out with me. Besides, I ought to have a change occasionally . . . I ought to get away from bottles and patients and hospitals once in a while and see another side of life . . ."

"Ian," she said gently, "you are telling a lot of fibs. You know going to the Cossack isn't your kind of life at all—you did it because you thought it would please me."

He took her hand, and spread the small white fingers out across his own large bony hand, then folded it up inside it for a minute.

"I . . ." he began, and then apparently changed his mind, for he said lightly enough, "Maybe I did. But you mustn't run away with the idea that I'm a complete old sobersides . . . I like this kind of thing, for a treat."

For a treat—not every night, like Larry . . . not that Larry was a pleasure-seeker, but he was a self-advertiser, and smart places were one of his chief opportunities for self-advertisement. She considered this thought coolly without pain and was for a minute shocked. A short while ago, such a disloyalty would never have entered her head. But when doubts creep in the whole structure is apt to collapse.

"A penny for them?" he said.

"I was thinking," she said slowly, the evening light touching her pale, sweet face with rosy-golden light, "I was thinking, wondering if one should never criticise people you love. I suppose these's a great deal of faith about love and once you start to doubt the whole thing crumbles."

"Perfect love casteth out fear," he said, and he said it quietly, so the quotation sounded simple, and not in the least preachy or portentous, "That goes for every kind of loving—if your love is deep enough, criticism does not matter . . .

you can whittle away a person with criticism, but it's the inmost heart of them you love, and nothing can alter that."

"Suppose, like Peer Gynt's onion, there's nothing in the centre?" she asked bitterly.

"You can't love an empty shell," he told her. "You may love its colour, or its pretty sounds, and a hundred ways about it—it may entrance you a long while, but you can't go on loving it."

She looked at him gravely—an empty shell? Larry? That was not true, there was genius in Larry, and thinking this brought back the flood of unhappiness that she had momentarily forgotten, and she was relieved when the taxi stopped in front of the Cossack Restaurant.

It was very determinedly Russian inside and of a brand that neither the Tsars nor the Soviet ever dreamed of. It seemed to be the offspring of a misguided union between Russian Ballet and Non-stop Variety, with a violence of colour, a riot of cupola and arch, a crop of Cossack hats on the part of the attendants, and peasant scarves on the part of the waitresses, breaking into a rash so far as the band was concerned, of Hungarian blouses, and wild but not particularly Russian music. But a French headwaiter of impeccable dignity, and an air of dissociating himself from the enthusiastic decor, led them to their table, and began to discuss food with the seriousness that only a real head-waiter seems to acquire.

Ian consulted her, and she left it to him, and found to her surprise he seemed to know quite a good deal about ordering food. He said as he turned back to her, and the waiter departed to the even more serious business of giving their order, "You know your father taught me quite a lot about food. When I was a student I think he thought I was starving," there was an expression in his eyes that suggested her father was not really mistaken, "So he used to take me out every week, when he had time, to a really good place, and feed me—and taught me a lot, just by talking to me, and showing me different sorts of people . . . I owe a great deal to your father . . ."

"Is that why you're so nice to me?"

"Lydia . . ." a new note in his voice, "Lydia . . . look," he held out his hand again, and put hers inside, closing his larger hand round it, "See how I can fold it up in mine—

that's how I'd like to fold you right up, in my heart, so no one, or no thing could possibly hurt you."

"Ian," she said, and in spite of herself her lips trembled, "If you whittled me down with criticism, there'd be precious little left."

"And what was left would all belong to someone else? Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

The colour crept up her cheeks as she answered, "Yes."

The waiter brought them a drink, and a dish of hors d'oeuvres, and he put her hand down with a comforting little pat, adding lightly, "It would be very bad for you to be wrapped up in my heart—people only become people through taking the knocks that come along, and getting over them."

Lydia found it easy to talk to him. Not of shows, of personalities, and the degrees of love, as Larry always talked, but about the old familiar things, which Larry knew nothing about. About her family, and about Greyfields, about his patients, about her father, never about himself, but it seemed, just because he never spoke of himself that she learned more about him. Once again the drug of happy undemanding companionship slid over her consciousness, so that she felt happy, and could talk, and eat and enjoy herself, and watch the dancers with him. They played a game together—trying to guess who the people were, what they did, if they were married, engaged, or meeting for the first time. It was just when Ian had invented a ludicrous and fantastic story about a plump blonde in a yellow hat accompanied by an extremely thin, and ascetic looking Polish officer, and Lydia was laughing helplessly at him, that she saw Larry. The laughter froze on her face and Ian looked across the room at the party who had just entered—three men, and Astra Grey. They went to a table near the dance floor, which had obviously been reserved for them, and they sat down, smiling and talking, Astra severely smart in black, which seemed to make her long silken blonde hair smoother and fairer than ever. Two of the men were approaching middle-age, distinguished, rather Bohemian types, whom he would have put down as professional artists, to do with the stage, or the world of literature or art. The other was just about the best looking young man he had ever seen, he had all the smooth dark arrogance of a panther. He watched him as he drew Astra's chair for her, watched her while, her eyes on the other two men, her lips in animated conversation, one long lazy hand

reached up and touched his momentarily, before he took his own place at the table.

Lydia had not moved.

He leaned towards her. "There you are," he said, "Fair game. What are they and what do they do? Shall I start? Actors. I'm not up in the theatre world, or I'd say they were pretty well known. They are obviously on show for everyone to see. The woman is clever, and very sure of herself as a woman, and the good-looking young man is her latest . . . conquest . . . why, Lyddy, what is it? What have I said?"

"Ian . . . I must go. I don't feel well."

His hand tightened fiercely on her arm, and his eyes were hard with understanding. "You mustn't go. Don't give her the triumph of seeing you are hurt. Stay where you are—he is coming over, perhaps to ask you to dance."

"Oh, Ian . . . I can't bear it . . . let us dance . . . let us go now . . ."

"I can't dance, and here he is," his hand on hers was painful, then he let it go with a swift little squeeze. Lydia, every muscle in her body taut with a sudden iron control, turned her head with a swift dignity and beauty as Ian rose, and Larry came to the table.

Astra had said, "Over there, Iachimo, your pretty little friend of the other night. She seems a trifle distressed at seeing you."

Larry's dark eyes smiled into hers. He admired her very much. She was beautiful, and she had taught him a lot, and she would teach him more. But he would teach her something too. That he was not caught, except by his own wish, and that even beauty, genius and experience could not hold him against his will. The black velvet eyes which Astra found so attractive expressed amusement, indifference . . . He rose to his feet.

"With your permission, I'll go and comfort her distress," he said.

Astra turned back to her other admirers, who had watched the little scene with interest. One of them, a fair grey-eyed sophisticated, middle-aged man, said, "That's a pretty dynamic young man—you must be careful, Astra."

She said sharply, too sharply, "I know what I'm doing, Mark," and then smiled her slow sweet smile, covering the anxiety in her voice, watching Larry walk across the now

empty dance floor pulling feminine glances after him like a magnet, and stop by Lydia's table.

Ian rose, and Lydia looked up at Larry with an automatic smile. She felt as though Ian's thin powerful body surrounded her, pouring his own strength into her. She said quite calmly, "Hallo, Larry? This is Dr. Ian McNab, a great friend of mine—Ian, this is Mr. Davidson."

The two men acknowledged each other. Ian with his usual grave watchful courtesy, Larry with the springy flash of a duellist who has been touched by an insignificant opponent. For a brief moment he was puzzled—he had not expected Lydia to be here, and seeing her here he had not expected her to be so calm and remote from him. It was some days since he had seen her, and he knew that at first she had tried to get in touch with him. He had expected his absence to hurt her, perhaps to make her angry and resentful, but in the end he knew it would bring her to his arms with a new and more desperate tenderness. He found this attitude of hers, cool, calm, waiting, a baffling little shock. As though he had left a bird, frightened and bewildered and safely in a trap, and returned to find it singing on a branch out of reach. As she sat there, waiting for him to speak, he had to make a decision quickly, the bland ignoring of Ian, the swift influx of charm, had a rather mechanical note about it, which Lydia perceived in spite of the dull beating of her heart, the slow painful beating of excitement. She wished passionately that he could appear to her affected, or cruel, anything but his graceless, gracious self.

"Lydia," he threw himself on her mercy, "Lydia, won't you forgive me and dance with me—I have honestly been trying to ring you up for days, but we have been rehearsing all hours, and when I did phone I never seemed to catch you."

"He hasn't phoned," her mind said, "they would have given me a message. It's all a pretence, a dear pretence . . . like a charming child trying to get round you. I wish I didn't love him so much."

Ian was standing, quietly, waiting. She was dying to dance with Larry. She was hungry for the touch of his fingers, and arms, hungry for the sound of his voice, she was jealous of Astra Grey, as she had not believed it possible to be jealous. She felt as though she was slipping away from Ian's encircling strength, slipping away into a deep pool where she would drown, resistlessly, helplessly. Ian moved

suddenly, lighting a cigarette, and incredibly she heard herself saying, "I am sorry, Larry. Not to-night, Dr. McNab doesn't dance, and it would scarcely be fair for me to show off my prowess before him."

She saw the temper flash into Larry's dark eyes, and his attractive mouth set in a long bitter line.

"Just as you like, of course . . ."

"I hope the rehearsals are going well."

"Excellently well. Thank you."

Ian sat down. Her heart was racing now, fast, she wished Larry would go away in case she cried out, or burst into tears, or fainted, or somehow or other managed to give herself idiotically away. Larry glanced swiftly from Lydia to Ian, gave his graceful slight inclination of the head, rather like some kind of foreign prince giving them permission to retire, and said, "Well, it's been nice seeing you—if you will excuse me, I must go back to my friends."

"Good-bye."

He turned, and went back to his party. Astra, deep in conversation, barely raised her head at his return. Presently, thinking he had been punished enough, she turned, and smiled at his sombre, brooding, attractive face. "Well, was she thrilled to tears to see you?"

His eyes veiled their disdain at the obviousness of these tactics. Her technique on the stage was of a far superior quality.

"I really don't know," he said.

Lydia looked steadily at Ian.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Now shall we go?"

"Yes," he said. "We'll go now."

They were in the darkness of the London street before the tears engulfed her. She walked along with him, silently, hot salt tears of sheer misery running down her face. Ian had helped her to save her pride, but at what a cost. If she knew anything about Larry he would never speak to her again—even if he loved her, and she was sure in his own peculiar way, Larry did still love her. The look in his eyes, the way he held her hand, his very anger told her so. But however deep her love, she knew him now, very well. She did not know the motives and purposes which had made him love her so passionately, and then ignore her so completely. But she knew his character, and she knew he was vain—she had never held it as a fault against him, indeed it was part of

his good looks and his dominant personality. If she could only see him, only explain that she had done what she had done out of pride . . . perhaps she had been wrong. Pride had no place in love. When she got home she would telephone him, and tell him . . . if they could only meet, and renew that deep urgency of longing, they would forget all these things . . . They came to the station, and Ian looked at her with a sudden, whimsical little smile.

"Repairs?" he asked.

"I think so," she said unsteadily.

"I'll wait for you."

She went to the cloak-room, and washed the tear-stains from her face, powdered, lipsticked, and combed her hair. If she had spoiled her own evening, she had certainly spoiled Ian's—it was decent of him to take it so well, asking no questions—what would Larry have done in similar circumstances? She had to smile—it was incredible to imagine any girl weeping over someone else while out with Larry—if there was any weeping to be done it would be over him. She found herself analysing their relationship. They had known each other such a short while, and yet this sort of violent, unreasoning jealousy, these painful upsets and scenes, this alternating between passion and coldness, seemed to make up the sum of their intimacy. Would it always be like this? Would there be no quiet moments of trust and peace and truth between these peaks of delirious happiness, and these depths of despair?

She was doing exactly what Ian had spoken of—whittling away her love with criticism. She would not do it. She did not want to examine it. She would ring up immediately she got home, and ask Larry to forgive her, and see her soon . . . even if it was just for a few minutes . . . just to get things straight again.

On the way home Ian talked, and she managed to keep up a fair show of interest, but she was longing to get home, to lift up the receiver, to hear Larry's voice.

As they passed his surgery he said, "I'll walk up the road with you, but I had better go in and see if there have been any calls."

"You needn't worry, Ian, I can easily go from here by myself."

"I'd like to go with you . . ." they stopped, as a shadowy figure rose from his doorstep. "Hallo, what's this?"

Lydia drew back momentarily as the figure came out into the light of the street lamp outside, and disclosed itself as an incredibly young man in khaki with a corporal's stripe on his sleeve. The young face was drawn and white with anxiety. He seized hold of Ian like a drowning man catching hold of a life belt.

"Doctor, I've been off my head with worry. Thank God you've come. I've been waiting here since seven o'clock."

"Hallo—it's Mr. Perkins, isn't it? Is it your wife? Didn't you go for the nurse?"

"She's got a case right at Down End, sir, that she can't leave. The woman looks like dying. But I didn't know what to do . . . we don't know anyone round to help, and young Bill, he's scared and keeps yelling for his mother . . . won't go to sleep . . ."

"All right, all right. I'm here now." Ian's voice was soothing and just a little amused, putting the nightmare of an unassisted birth into its place as not being so very terrible.

"Lydia, would you be a brick and go along with Mr. Perkins? You might be able to reassure the little boy . . . I'll run in and get my things, and catch you up. If you are there before I am, get plenty of boiling water."

He had asked her, and yet it had been an order. She had a sudden vivid picture of Larry coming home into the little flat over the embankment, and the telephone that in a minute could bring them close together. But the young soldier's terrible, anxious need knocked the picture away. That could wait—this could not.

"Of course I will, Ian," she said quickly. He touched her shoulder briefly, with gratitude, and a little thrill ran through her—she did not realise how much his praise and appreciation meant. She turned without another word and accompanied the anxious young corporal down the road.

CHAPTER FOUR

LYDIA began to run and she had no intention of running—she just could not help it. She began by walking briskly down the dark street thinking of Larry and Astra Grey, and trying to get back into the self-absorbed well of painful emotion that she had drowned in all the way home. But the young corporal's consuming anxiety about his wife gradually communicated itself to her. Their brisk walk changed into a trot, and the trot into a run, and by the time they were in sight of the road where he lived, she was tearing breathlessly along by his side as though some enemy were on their heels. She glanced at his set face as they shot through a pool of yellow light thrown by a street lamp and saw its tense, concentrated look, and the beads of sweat standing out on his brown forehead. She was at once ashamed of her selfish longing to get back into her depths of self-pity. This boy was not with her. He was with his wife in her suffering, his love for her magnifying every pain. She slowed down and caught his arm.

"Hey," she said firmly. "Slow down. My name's Lydia. What's yours?"

"Bill. We'd better hurry. I don't like her being alone. She gets scared when she's alone."

"We'll hurry. But if we go on like this we shan't be much use to Dr. McNab when he comes. Take it easy, and tell me about it as we go."

Under her firm hand he slowed down to the brisk walk again. They got their breath, and by the time they had reached the tall shabby house, rather like a lift shaft with a series of small rooms built into it, he had told her quite a lot. His name was Bill Perkins. He had been in the army and married for four years. He had one little boy, and this was their second child. His wife was run down, not as well as he would have wished. They had two rooms on the top floor of the house, and she would stay there all through the raids, although she sent the little boy away into the country. "Felt she had to hang on to the only bit of home we had, besides, when I did get home, London was always the easiest place to get to." The little boy was back with them, but he was a

bit unsettled. "Won't let his mother out of his sight, after being away from her for so long. Thought I should never quiet him this evening . . ."

They went up the long winding stairway, which smelled as the stairs of flats that have no porters invariably smell, of dust, cats and stale cabbage. But the little flat at the top was pleasant enough, clean, and glowing with a neat pride. An attractive dark girl was pacing about the sitting room, wrapped in an old red dressing-gown. Her face was white, her dark hair lank and damp, and there were big purple shadows below her eyes. A very small boy with brilliant suspicious eyes watched her every movement, and when Lydia came in with his father, he rushed across to his mother and buried his face in her gown.

"It's all right, Molly," Bill Perkins put his arm round his wife. "Don't fret. Dr. McNab will be here in a minute. This is a friend of his—Miss—er—Lydia."

Mrs. Perkins gave a little twisted smile, and said apologetically, "Silly of me to panic, but you get like that when there's no one near." The bout of pain subsided, and she tried to comfort the little boy. "He's so scared I'm going to leave him again. It's so late, he'll be worn out. Tony, go to bed now, there's a good boy."

Tony looked at Lydia suspiciously, "Has she come to take me away again?" he demanded.

"Heavens!" said Lydia indignantly, "Don't you know Mummy's going to have a new baby? However could she manage if you went away? Daddy has not a very long leave you know, you've got to stay here and look after them?"

This, apparently, had not occurred to Tony. He came out of the sheltering skirt and stared. Then he said uncompromisingly, "How if I don't like it when it comes?"

For the first time that evening the overstrained faces of the two young parents relaxed into laughter, and then Mrs. Perkins' mouth caught for a moment in a spasm of pain. Lydia said the first thing that came into her head, "You can't like or dislike babies. They're like puppies, you have to look after them."

Tony's eyes lit with interest, "Really like puppies?" he said, "I'd rather have a puppy, if Mummy wouldn't mind."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Perkins, but her pain bright eyes were smiling.

Lydia put the water on to boil for Ian, and helped Bill

Perkins to move the little boy's cot into a corner of the sitting room. Then she screened the light with a newspaper, so that the bright light did not shine upon him and he could doze. She made tea and when Ian's car was heard outside, and he ran up the stairs, giving a quick look round as he came in, he gave her a little smile which was a reward in itself. She knew then how easy it would have been to be infected by their panic instead of calming it. It gave her a curious sense of belonging to Ian, to his work, of knowing in a small way the sense of triumph at a completed healing—a thing well done.

He said, "Everything seems well under control here."

"We didn't feel so helpless with Lydia here," said Bill Perkins sheepishly. Lydia's eyes met Ian's in swift amusement—what they thought *she* could do in the event of the unannounced arrival of another young Perkins, she did not know. But Ian was here now. He took Mrs. Perkins through into the bedroom, and came out again presently. The little boy had dropped to sleep, and Bill went in to see his wife again.

Ian said quietly, "You've done well, Lyddy, thank you. Fear is the greatest illness of all. You cured that all right."

She looked up at him suddenly. "Do you know, I was quite helpless? I didn't know what to do, and then I had an inspiration—I just asked myself what mother would have done or said, and that's what I did."

"Yes?" he gave a little secret smile. "Well, then do something for her—and me. Nip along to the corner, and telephone her and tell her where you are. It's . . . he glanced at his watch. "It's just eleven. I'd like you here for another hour, in case of emergencies. But I know she worries about you."

"Worries about me?" said Lydia blankly.

"Don't you worry about her?" he asked unexpectedly.

Lydia hesitated, remembering seeing her mother that night with the unknown man, whom she had since learned was Andrew Gander. Worried? Yes, she supposed she had been worried. She had worried, selfishly, perhaps, about her own world, because if Marte altered the floor fell out of it.

She had fought against loving Larry too much, although every instinct in her had longed to be caught up in that whirlwind of passion, she had fought it because of Marte. Because of Marte's clean-cut, casual, humorous principles

which she had grown up with and unknowingly absorbed, she had felt if Marte gave up, there was no point in her fighting too. If Marte did not really believe in the things she said she believed in, then perhaps Larry was right. Perhaps his "gather ye rosebuds while ye may" theory of living and loving was the sensible way to go on in this shifting world.

"Go on," said Ian, giving her a gentle little push, "I can't spare you for long."

"All right," she said quickly. She ran down the stairs and along the dark road to the telephone box at the corner and quickly dialled her home number. Marte answered, and she quickly explained where she was and what she was doing. There was a little silence. Then Marte said in her deep, warm voice, "Thank you, dear, for letting me know," and it was as though she had put out her hand and touched her. Lydia knew then that many nights when she had been out late, sometimes until the early morning with Larry, her mother must have lain awake, worrying. She said good-night, and it occurred to her, as she went back up the narrow dark stairs, that she had passed a very hasty judgment upon her mother. Her feet slowed down on the stairs—had she thought thus of her mother because she herself had felt guilty—about Larry?

She opened the door. Bill Perkins was standing in the middle of the room, wringing his hands together. Behind the closed bedroom door came noises, then Andrew's quiet voice, and then, like a miracle, silence, and the thin protesting wail of a baby.

It was after midnight when Ian drove her home, leaving the four Perkins tucked up and happy like birds in a nest. The night was still and cool, and the white may trees were shining like ghostly crinolines in the darkness. Lydia sat close to Ian, as he drove slowly home through the quiet streets, and she was filled with a quiet happiness as though she had arrived safely in port after a storm. The pain and jealous turmoil of the early evening had passed away, and it seemed petty and insignificant beside this sense of something wonderful accomplished. Under Ian's instructions she had washed and dressed the new baby girl—she had never seen anything so small and beautiful, so ugly and helpless, so full of intense vibrant life.

"It's been a strange evening," she said.

"The second part of it was strange to you," he smiled, "The first part to me."

"Yes," her voice was a little tired. The first part was not strange to her indeed. She had learned to expect scenes, passions, jealousies and tender reconciliations where Larry was concerned—but it certainly did not look as though there would be any new reconciliation this time. Something of the quiet peace went from the night, something of the earlier pain dropped back into her heart. She stopped at the gate, and turned to him, where he stood by the car.

"Good-night, Ian, and thank you."

"You learn a bit of psychology in this job," he said gently, "I will take a bet that Larry will be running round in circles after you to-morrow," in the half light of the lamp his eyes rested upon the smooth contours of her lovely face, "He'd be a fool if he didn't. You made his elegant actress look as though she had been kept in cold storage."

Again the swift warmth, the gentle touch, easing her pain. The brief words meant so much. Even if Astra were famous, elegant, and beautiful, she was much younger, much nearer to Larry. Some expression in her eyes, some remembered pain, made him touch her shoulder briefly in farewell. Then he got into his car and drove away. She stood there a moment, listening, not as if she were listening to the car, but as though she could hear his footsteps, the firm sharp one, the light dragging one, going away into the distance. Then she opened the door and went into the house.

By the telephone on the hall table was a note. "Mr. Larry Davidson rang, will you telephone him to-morrow at the theatre, after ten. Urgent." Lydia stood staring. Ian had been right. But the old flame of excitement did not rise so quickly—she was not sure if she would ring. She picked up the note, pushed it into her handbag, and went quietly up the stairs to bed.

The telephone rang in the large Nissen hut which housed the officers' mess at the A.F.U. at Low Menton where Robin was stationed. All the heads went up hopefully, Robin's among them. The heads round the poker table went down quickly, because there was a lot of money flying around, and it was a serious business. None of them would have left the game if it had been Hedy LaMarr on the wire. The darts players hesitated, curious, not quite so enthralled. The magazine readers waited hopefully. Robin, carving his initials

lugubriously in the back of a chair, scarcely bothered to raise his head. He had not been outside the mess this week—he could not afford to. He simply had to save some money. All evening he had sat there, whittling away at the back of the chair with his knife, watching Trelawney's dark face above the card table, and all evening Trelawney had lost.

If Trelawney continued to lose, he would certainly ask for the forty pounds which Robin owed him, and Robin had in his pocket exactly one week's pay. Robin hoped the telephone call was for him. He hoped it was Diane, whom he had not seen for a week, whom he had not been able to afford to see. But he did not care who it was so long as he could go out and break the monotony, and get away from that darned game where he had to sit and watch Trelawney, and feel like some kind of Jonah, that he was bringing him ill-luck.

It was for him. The fellow who had answered it thumbed him across the room, and he went quickly, followed by various expressive and derisive noises. It was Diane. She appeared to be very excited and wanted to see him at once.

"I can't come far, darling," he said quickly, for Diane thought nothing of telephoning from Cornwall and insisting on him coming for the week-end. "I've got a cross-country in the morning early."

"You haven't to come far, stupid. I'm only down the road. At The Garter. You must come along, Rob, I've the most terrific news for you."

"Very well. I'll be along in a minute. Make it good news. I need some."

He went back and picked up his cap, went out through the rows of huts towards the gate, and walked down to the hotel which was about half a mile down the road. It was a small place, standing in gardens by the river bank, once famous for summer week-ends, but now it was kept running by R.A.F. wives down for limited periods. He enquired for Diane, and to his surprise was shown up to a sitting room on the first floor.

He went up and knocked, the door flew open and she bounded into his arms. Her hair muffled his lips, perfumed, soft and tickling, and his arms closed round the small delectable figure in the flowing rose-coloured negligee with a little inward groan. Over the top of her head he saw a large assortment of cases and trunks, a portable radio, and Pootzi

with his tongue lolling out and battle in his eyes. It was apparent that Diane had moved in. But why?

She gazed at him rapturously. Like all people who have been taught to cultivate an artificial mask of sophistication, Diane had abandoned it utterly once it had cracked. She had fallen in love, and all her carefully cultivated pretences had gone by the board. She pulled him into a deep chair, and sat upon his knees in a perfumed florescence of chiffon and ribbons and crepe-de-chine, kissed the tip of his blunt nose, counted his freckles, took off his cap and rumpled his curly dark hair, and put her arms round his neck and rubbed her smooth silken cheek against his. Robin was only human and very much in love—it was quite a while before he got down to serious questioning.

"Now, look, Diane, what are you doing here? And what's this wonderful news you told me about?"

"You sound rather cross," she pouted, "You are not to be cross because I planned it all to be so wonderful. Robin, I have never seen you look so tough before! Battle-dress suits you—and with all your hair on end and that bristle on your chin. Tough! Umm, fearsome. I love you," she presented her lovely, laughing mouth to be kissed again. Robin held her away from him, "Diane—be serious. Tell me, what are you doing here? And what did you want to tell me?"

"I am serious. It's very serious that you should love me."

Robin showed signs of exasperation. She sat straight up on his knee, her long, pretty hands still fiddling with his hair and tie, and said casually, "I've left home."

"You've what? Why?"

"Oh, because I had a stinking row with Mummy."

"What about?" Robin asked, knowing only too well what the answer would be.

"About you, of course."

He took her elbows, and gave her a little shake. "Come on, tell me all. Give!"

"Well, she came in from seeing Daddy in a terrible mood. Apparently she wanted some money, and he would not part up, and I gather he is talking about divorcing her," Diane was blandly casual about her mother's behaviour, "I expect he's getting wise to her at last. Then she said I was not to see you any more. She said you were too young, had no money and no future. I said I loved you and that we were

going to be married, and she would find out whether you had a future or not later on. It got worse and worse, until she sent me upstairs. So I packed all my things, and when she was out with her new boy friend—oh, you needn't look so shocked, Mother has lots of boy-friends—I ordered a taxi, and came here."

Robin rose slowly to his feet, lifting her gently and setting her down near him. His smooth brown boy's face was very grave, his lips a little pale.

He said slowly, "There's a lot of truth in what she said, you know, Diane."

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"I have no money—and precious little future, yet. I know the war is over in Europe, but there's still the Far East. I should finish here in a week or too, and then, supposing I'm posted to Burma, or China, or India . . . you'd be alone, perhaps for years. You're awfully young, and just terribly pretty—and used to having everything you could wish for."

Her mouth trembled, and the big sapphire-coloured eyes swam with tears. "Oh, Robin, don't be so cruel. You don't really want to marry me at all. I thought, I thought you'd be *glad*! You're always telling me to stand up to mother and choose for myself, and now I have, and y-you . . ."

"Oh, my darling," His arms went round her quickly, "You're such a child. I adore you. I'm longing to marry you, but we must face facts."

She put her head down on his shoulders happily as he held her close. There was a sharp knock on the door, and Mrs. Gander came in without waiting for an answer. Mrs. Gander was in her forties. Her artificial blonde hair was set in rigid lines, and her eyes and mouth, heavily made-up, were equally rigid. She wore very good clothes, and a lot of diamonds—her thin angularity remained unsoftened by the magnificent mink coat. She stood there looking at them. Diane and Robin sprang apart, and then Diane nervously put out her hand, and Robin took it quickly in his. He could not bear the look in her eyes. He would not let her go back if he could prevent it, although it was utterly crazy that he should even contemplate marriage.

"Very pretty," said Mrs. Gander. "Am I to presume that you're already living with my daughter, Mr. Tredgold?"

Robin went crimson, but his anger gave him dignity.

"You may presume what you like," he said coldly. "You

know it isn't true. It's true I'm in love with Diane, I also respect her."

It was Mrs. Gander's turn to colour, the implication was pointed enough. She said maliciously, "I suppose you know I could charge you with enticement. Diane is only nineteen."

"I think you'd find it pretty difficult—also pretty silly when one thinks of the rotters you allow her to associate with."

There was something about his cold lack of respect that angered her. She put him down at once as suburban, out of her sphere of fast-moving life and wealthy people. If Andrew instituted divorce proceedings, which he showed every sign of doing, she knew Diane would be an asset, a very attractive asset, but not if she were tied to this idiotic young nobody. She looked critically round the room, estimated its cost per day, looked speculatively at Robin. She knew he had little money apart from his pay—her first action when Diane made a new acquaintance was to check up on their financial standing.

"I don't propose to make a scene," she said acidly, "but also I don't propose to help Diane in this foolishness. I shall not give my consent to any marriage, and I shall certainly not provide her with any money. She has an excellent home to come back to, and I hope she'll have the sense to come to it. I don't suppose for a moment her father will either approve or help. We will see how long this will go on. You know where to come, Diane, when you get bored with this romantic situation. But—if you do come back, you must realise that it is on the condition that you never see this young man again."

She went out, leaving a cold pool of silence behind her. Diane glanced cautiously at Robin. She suddenly felt horribly young and alone. If Robin deserted her there was nothing for it but to beat an ignominious retreat. He said slowly, "Have you any money, Diane?"

She ferretted in her handbag. "About a pound."

"How much do these rooms cost?"

"I—I don't know. I just asked for a room with a sitting room and bathroom."

"Oh, that will be quite a bit. About two or three pounds a night, I should think."

She went pink. "I was going to ask you to lend me some," she said slowly, "Or give me some. If we are getting

married, it doesn't matter, does it, really, asking you for money? "

"No," said Robin heavily. He took his case out and handed her his last five pounds, "I'm the person you have to ask. That's all I have now, Diane, and I shan't have any more for some time. You had better pay the bill here, and we must find you somewhere cheaper to live."

She took it, chastened, a little afraid of this serious Robin.

He said slowly, "Do you think you could get your father's consent to our marrying? If we could get married at once, I would at least have an allowance for you . . ."

"I don't know. I hardly ever see Daddy. I shouldn't think it very likely. He'd probably send me back home . . ."

"You're not going back there," he said fiercely. "Not to that old . . ." he stopped, remembering it was her mother.

"But perhaps I had better go back. I don't want to be a nuisance . . . Robin. I didn't realise it would be difficult for you. Perhaps I could get a job . . ."

He looked at her with a swift, tender mockery. What on earth could she do? She had never even been taught to mend her own stockings. A fine kind of wife for him to choose . . . except that he loved her so. He caught her to him a little roughly, and kissed her. "Don't worry, sweetheart," he said, "I'll think of some way. I'll see you to-morrow . . . oh look—it's Mother's birthday this week. I want you to come and meet her, and my sisters—will you? "

"I hope they'll like me."

"Don't be silly," he kissed her again. Marte, he thought, might be a little startled at his choice, but he could never believe that anyone could help liking Diane.

He walked slowly back to the mess. He was completely and perfectly pranged. He had Diane on his hands now, to take care of, or else she had to go back to that raddled harpy of a mother of hers. He had no money. He was as likely as not to be on his way to Burma in a couple of months. Things could not be worse, that was one consolation. The poker game was over when he went into the mess, and most of the fellows had turned in. Only Trelawney stood at the bar looking concentratedly into a glass of bitter. He looked up as Robin came in, "Ah, Tredgold," he said thoughtfully. "You're just the boy I want to see."

With a sinking heart Robin went over to him.

People were not buying madly although Victory was in the air. Marte in the almost empty department thought back across the years to the last victory she could remember, with John's ship arriving just in time, and the great crowds and the wild day and night, and sitting bemusedly hand-in-hand on a bus abandoned in one of the packed streets, and John saying as though he could not think of anything else. "We'll get married, Marte . . . now we can get married!"

That, she thought, had been like falling downstairs, but this victory had been coming for weeks, like going slowly down, step by step, a candle in your hand, to make sure the burglar was not still in the cellar. The fact that the burglar had gone was a cause for relief rather than celebration. Still, in other departments, where there were flags and trinkets, and off-ration goods, giddy, gay things, they were fairly busy. No woman, however enthusiastic, could conjure eighteen coupons out of the air to celebrate victory, these days. So the department had been fairly quiet all day, and as she sat at her desk, checking her orders and invoices, looking down the long pale grey expanse of carpet at the gay models on the stands, the group of chattering assistants all planning post-war paradises, at the shining mirrors and showcases, she presently became aware of a familiar and picturesque figure bearing down on her. She recognised the stately majestic tread, the indiscriminate clothes, the amber beads, the gold and ruby rings, the long earrings, the brave hat of a past era, the long cream gloves, the trailing scarves, the inevitable string bag crammed with books, newspapers, manuscripts, knitting and odd bits of shopping. It was undoubtedly her sister Mady.

Marte rose with a smile and a sigh. She loved her sister, but that imposing if a trifle untidy presence usually betokened some kind of trouble. Irresistibly she was reminded of being nearly frightened to death as a child, at waking and seeing her elder sister stalking about the room in her nightdress, with a large carving knife in her hand, declaiming fiercely, "Infirm of purpose! Give me daggers!"

Her voice had not altered down the years, except to get deeper and fuller, as she said in a voice that echoed exquisitely through the department, and caused the blonde first assistant to jump convulsively, "How are you, Marte, my dear? Well, we may celebrate peace any day now. I thought of you and the children, and felt I must see you,

although," she sketched an anxious and dramatic gesture, "Whether this sort of prevalent excitement is any good to a serious production, I cannot say. We open in ten days' time."

Marte detached herself from the wide embrace, disentangling various scarves and beads from her buttons, and said briefly, "I hope you have a great success. I'm glad to see you, Mady. Come in here a moment, and we can talk. I'll get one of the girls to fetch some tea."

Having removed Mady's somewhat flamboyant presence from the curious eyes of her staff (she could do nothing about the booming voice and prayed that the conversation would not become too intimate) Marte poured her some tea and settled herself to listen. She knew that Mady's visit was not one of mere sisterly affection although when she remembered her relations, Mady was affectionate enough. She knew there was something her sister wanted to tell her, and that sooner or later she would say it, so she composed herself to wait. Never were two sisters more different. Mady flamboyant, theatrical, majestic and untidy and vividly intelligent and shrewd beneath all the show. Marte, ten years younger, neat, well-groomed, clean-cut, her wide tolerance and quiet humour and kindness undermining her most severe criticisms and judgments.

Mady talked around the earth about the war, about the San Francisco Conference, about the post-war theatre, about broadcasting Shakespeare, and Marte waited and listened, because it was all very interesting and informative, and also she wanted to know what Mady had really come to say. Finally she arrived at the new production.

"I really should not be here. The work is endless, and without me they are quite lost. But everyone was up in the air to-day about these rumours of peace, so I gave up at three and sent them home. It's going to be a good production. It's going to be very good. Astra, now, is an actress of very great merit. It's just as well she is, because meeting her you would cast her as Delilah rather than that transparent idiot Imogen but it's amazing how she can transfer herself into the sweet flowery innocent creature. It's something to do with being a blonde, I think. It's amazing the contrast between her and our Iachimo. Sensational. He's quite new. An experiment. He's going to take the town by storm, unless I'm very mistaken. Very dark, very handsome, very dangerous, very much the Medici type of Italian . . . I only

hope that Astra doesn't wake up from her infatuation for him, and realise he's stealing the show."

So this was it. Marte gave herself a little mental shake-up, and gave Mady her lead.

"That is Larry Davidson, isn't it? Lydia's friend?"

"Ye-es . . ." Mady produced a large pair of horn-rimmed glasses, put them on and regarded Marte over the top of them. "Yes." There was another long pause. "Just how far has that friendship gone, Marte?"

"I know very little about it," she said lightly. No use telling Mady about Lydia's pale, distraught face, her anxious waiting during these past weeks for a message or a letter. "I don't think it's anything very serious."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Very glad indeed. I was rather worried about Lydia. She's a nice little thing. I'm very fond of her. I wouldn't like her to be hurt."

"You think he's likely to hurt her then?"

"Likely. He can't help it. He's that sort of man. Once a woman is in love with him, he must use her, and once she's no use to him, he's not interested."

"What use could Lydia possibly be to him? I mean apart from the fact that she's very pretty and nice to be in love with."

"Well, she introduced him to me."

"So she did!" Marte rose to her feet suddenly worried, suddenly desperately anxious for Lydia's happiness. The connection was so obvious and Lydia would not think of it. She herself only thought of Mady as her sister. As Aunt Mady, charming and rather eccentric, not as an important theatrical celebrity. Of course an introduction like that would mean a great deal to a handsome, talented, and unknown young actor.

"How long have you been in rehearsal?" she asked.

"Over three weeks."

Three weeks. It was three weeks since Lydia had seen him—she knew that. Three weeks of torment for the child. He could not surely have been callous enough to ignore her immediately he had got what he wanted?

Mady said trenchantly, "Oh, don't fret about it, Marte. Lydia has youth and beauty. There will be a whole procession of other young men before she settles down."

"Not Lydia, Mady. She's sensitive, and single-minded. Buntz . . ." Marte's voice, thinking of the new battles with

Bunty about late hours was a trifle grim. "Yes, Bunty will have processions. But Lydia isn't a minx. There isn't an ounce of feminine minx in her whole make-up. I sometimes wish there were. It's an armour, even if it isn't ethical." She stopped, realising that she had said more than she intended, and that however good were Mady's intentions in warning her, she was quite likely to go back to the theatre and spread a tale of her innocent little niece's broken heart and embroider it with great relish. She said quickly, "Oh, well, perhaps I'm imagining things. Darn you, Mady, and your theatrical tales. Lydia hasn't spoken three words to me about this young man. It's probably nothing at all."

"If she hasn't spoken about it, so much the worse. She's probably got something to hide." Mady rose to her feet, pulled on her garden-party-ish gloves, and collected her shopping and string bag. "I saw them together some weeks ago, and she looked like a girl in love to me. If ever I saw an introduction wangled, that one was. And Astra need not think she has got him hook-line-and-sinker, even if she does propose to marry him out of hand, which it appears she does."

"You mean he is going to marry Astra Grey?"

"I mean Astra is going to marry him. She's ten years older, and she has no hobbies. She's certainly picked one to keep her hands full this time."

"Oh."

She went out into the showroom with Mady, her mind a confused and anxious picture of distorted shadows round Lydia's pale, tense face. The first assistant was occupied with a solitary customer at the further end of the room. It looked uncommonly long and empty to Marte. She felt as though she would like to run away from it all.

A junior touched her sleeve and she turned impatiently.

"Mr. Gander would like to see you in his office, Mrs. Tredgold."

Andrew? He had not sent for her like this for months—it usually meant trouble when he sent for the heads of departments. She thanked the girl quickly, and saw Mady to the lift. She glanced in a large wall mirror, powdered her nose, and ran a comb through her hair; gave her suit a twitch and went up to the top floor to face the lion in his den.

His secretary showed her into the big modern luxuriously furnished office, walled with windows along the southern side through which she could see an endless view of London

roofs and towers and chimneys and the occasional tossing trees of park and square. Andrew rose, a tall, well-built, good-looking man, and came towards her. She took his proffered hand nervously, and glanced up into his dark eyes with an enquiring, "Well?"

"Sit down," he pointed to a comfortable chair, drew one near, offered and lit her cigarette. "You must forgive me, my dear, for calling you here during business hours, but," he smiled, "if you won't have dinner with me, and have no time to see me, I have to descend to brute force."

She laughed, and relaxed. "You had me scared, Andrew. For a moment I thought I had dropped some frightful brick or something had gone wrong with the department."

"Nothing," he glanced at some paper on the desk, "I have your monthly returns. They are excellent considering the handicaps of wartime. Although I suppose in a few hours, or a few days, it will be wartime no longer."

"It's difficult to believe. I'm afraid it doesn't help me greatly from a purely selfish point of view. Robin will be almost sure to go east."

"Ah, that boy of yours. I hope not, for your sake." They were silent for a moment, then she said, "What was it you wanted to see me about, Andrew?"

He rose and went slowly to the window. The well-built, soldierly figure in the superlatively tailored grey suit had become very familiar, almost dear to her last year. A tower of strength when she was bewildered or lonely. He said, "Marte, I want you to know. I've come to the end of my marriage."

She rose to her feet, and went quickly to his side. "Andrew—what do you mean?"

He turned swiftly, his hands on her shoulders, his dark eyes searching her face, "You have known for a long while, Marte, what I felt about you, and what you had come to mean to me. Cool, lovely, honest and good . . ."

"Andrew . . ." her hand rose protestingly.

"No, let me finish. I have stood a lot of rottenness, Marte. I have seen the money I have made wasted and ill-used, and the name I am proud of dragged in the dirt. I have seen my daughter made into a useless, spoiled brat, capricious and ignorant and thoughtless. I've come to the end. You let me kiss you once, Marte . . ."

"Andrew, please . . . don't go on . . . I must explain . . ."

"There's no need for explanations now. I was lonely enough, and wanted you enough to have taken you if you had come to me at any price. But now—or in a little while, I shall be free. I have evidence for a divorce. I have had it before, but for Diane's sake I did not take it. Now I see I was wrong. Now I see that her mother has done the child nothing but harm, and has given her no real standards of honesty or intelligence. Nothing but money, clothes, display, men. Now I'm through. At the end of the year if you can wait, Marte, if you will wait for me, my dear, I hope you will be my wife."

There was a silence, and Marte turned away, overwhelmed and shamed that this affair which she had taken so lightly, should mean so very much to him. She put her hands across her face, pressing back the tears from her eyes.

"Marte . . ."

"Andrew. You forgot that I am not free."

"But your children, all except the young one, are grown up now . . ."

"It's not that, Andrew—John is coming back."

"Coming back?" he repeated blankly, "You didn't tell me . . . ?"

"I haven't told anyone. Not even the children. I don't know why, unless it is that I wanted so much to have everything different before he came. More like it was before he went away, when we were all together—a unit. He will be in England soon. And Andrew, I feel so ashamed that I should have let you think it might be different. That was what was so horrid of me. Taking your friendship so thoughtlessly, and using it. Because—even if John had never returned, I could never be married to anyone else but him. We always loved each other as children—we have been married nearly twenty-five years. Roots go deep—we will always love each other until the end."

He walked slowly towards his desk, and began to move the papers on it purposely, like a man who has received bad news. She said quickly, "I want to give in my resignation."

His face twisted with swift pain. "Marte, there is no need for that. Surely you do not think . . ."

"That you would be angry? Or bear malice?" she smiled, and stubbed out her cigarette. "Ah, no. I know you too

well for that. I was going to give in my notice in any case. I have not much time, and a great deal to do before he comes home."

"It is just as you wish," he said slowly.

"How long will you need? Notice, I mean?"

He roused himself again with an effort, and smiled. "The firm will need about a week. Or they will ask for a week. You'll be difficult to replace. Myself . . ." he made a little gesture. "A lifetime, perhaps." He came to her side again, his smile shrewd and understanding. "You've handled everything yourself, been father and mother and wage-earner, and now you want to go home to pull everything shipshape so that it's all perfect when the captain comes home to inspect—is that it?"

"That's it exactly."

"And I—I made a mess of married life. I wonder—I wonder if I was hoping you would put it straight. All the things I couldn't straighten out myself?"

She laughed, giving him her hands. "Oh, Andrew—spare me my vanity at all costs."

"All right. If you will spare me mine. Listen, next week, Marte, I had planned a party. I hadn't forgotten your birthday, and I wanted you to meet some of my friends. Will you still come? Leave me at least my sour grapes, and let me show you all the things you might have had."

"Andrew, you are a child. Very well. I will come."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

He watched her go, trim straight back, small head with its attractive curly crown of greying hair. I was only when he saw her go that he knew just how wasted part of his life had been.

Larry had telephoned Lydia that morning. Stubbornly she had not obeyed his lordly instructions to get in touch with him. Partly because she was confused, and partly because she did not want to open up all that pain and suffering again. Since the evening she had spent with Ian, she had come out on the other side of that intensity of pain. As though he had unknowingly dragged her with him into his own world, a sane and friendly world of work and tolerance, of service and kindly humour, and for the moment Larry's world of wild passion and rose-coloured fantasy seemed very unreal. Real or unreal she did not want to go back there, so she steeled

herself, steelled her nerves and her heart, resisted the impulse to fly back to his arms at the first offer, and had not obeyed that imperative message. She found that during this pause she had cultivated a healthy touch of malice. Let him know what it was like to be ignored, to wait for the telephone to ring, or a letter to fall through the door. Let him realise what it was like to be forgotten. She knew it was empty enough, for Larry would not suffer, neither would he wait for a message. He was probably too caught up in the excitement of the new production to even think about her. But it seemed she was wrong. This morning he had telephoned, and hope streamed like a banner through her world.

It had been an exciting day, with rumours and counter-rumours of complete victory in the air, and the London buildings breaking into a doubtful rash of red-white-and-blue. Then Larry's voice. She had thought it must be Ian, and was a little surprised to find she was slightly disappointed. But at his second word, the warm direct voice, arrogant, expectant, with the sultry undertones of passion, the blood raced through her veins again, and the colour came up beneath her fine, magnolia-petal skin.

"Holding out on me, eh? "

"No . . . I just thought . . ."

He cut in. "Meet me this afternoon? Everyone here has gone crazy and no serious rehearsing is possible. I hope they get over it before opening night. You're certain to be able to get away this afternoon. No one will notice."

"I can't promise." But from the state of the office, she knew there was a fair chance that she would not be missed for an hour. Her immediate boss was not even back from lunch, the junior typists were telephoning their boy-friends indiscriminately, and everyone over forty was busily recalling the Armistice of 1918. "I'll try," she said.

"All right. St. James's Park, three o'clock. The Ritz Gate. I'll wait for you."

"I'll try," she said again.

By ten minutes to three there was a telephone message from her Chief telling her not to expect him back. Someone had produced a bottle of perfectly frightful sherry, and the junior typists' boy-friends in a variety of Allied uniforms had arrived and were hanging flags across the front of the building amid general excitement and great risk to life and limb. One or two people were talking a little too excitedly,

as though determined not to be wet blankets on the general exaltation and relief. The grey department head whose son had not come back, the young secretary who had had a brief week of honeymoon as the sum total of her married life. No one would notice if Lydia went out for a short while. She snatched a jacket and ran out into the warm sunshine, along Piccadilly to the Park. Larry was waiting for her, aloof from the crowd, and the general feeling of excitement. He wore his old green sports jacket, and an old green hat jammed down on the side of his head, and it seemed to Lydia that he had never looked so handsome, so tall, and so darkly attractive. He caught sight of her, and went forward quickly, but his eyes did not light, or his grim mouth smile.

"Hallo, you managed to come, then?" he said. "I haven't long. Let's go into the Park."

They went through the gate into the green space beyond. There had been rain the day before, and everything was a mist of green and gold sunshine, and the red and pink may trees were full of blossom, rich and heavy like great bouquets. He stalked along silently, and she hurried to keep up with him, glancing up at his cold, averted face, a hot, tight feeling of anger rising within her.

"We mustn't go any farther," she said presently, "I have to go back and clear up, and see that letters are posted. What did you want me for, Larry?"

He looked at her with heavy, smouldering eyes.

"What do you think?"

"I haven't any idea."

He put out his hand and touched her cheek just where the soft, dark curls curled damply by her forehead. "If you were not so damnably exquisite and desirable, I would never have seen you again."

Her anger faded in the face of his evident pain. "But, Larry, what have I done?"

"What do you mean by going out with that fellow? What do you think I felt like seeing you with him? His damned proprietary air. I had been hungry for you, Lydia, literally hungry for you. Couldn't you have had a little more patience? A little more kindness? I told you I would be busy..."

Knowing he was near her, that he had wanted her and missed her, that perhaps his pain had been as great as her own, the anger died. He had been busy. It had not really

been very long. It was only when you were waiting, hoping for a message that it seemed so long.

"Larry," the tears were soft in her voice and eyes, "Larry—I didn't dream . . . Oh, I thought you didn't care . . ."

"Didn't care?" he took a step towards her. They were almost alone in a little hollow between the trees, and he swept her up savagely into his arms, his lips fiercely on hers. For a moment she resisted, somehow she had fallen out of tune with this passion, and then she relaxed, and let him kiss her. The relief after these weeks of heartbreak was so great that the tears overflowed and slipped slowly down her cheeks.

He was remorseful immediately. "My darling, my poor sweet one, don't cry. Forgive me . . . I didn't realise how you felt. Look," he set her down, took out an immaculate handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "There—we've both been a couple of fools, but it's over. Why are people in love so cruel to each other, I wonder?"

A secret whisper ran through her mind. "Are they? Are they always? Ian loves me, I know, and he would never hurt me . . . even in his urgent and important business of life and health, of birth and death he would always find time to let me know . . ." What was the point of thinking about those things? Here she was walking through a magic world of sunlight and green, of pink and red may trees, the excitement of coming peace running through the air, and her hand swinging in Larry's again.

"We won't ever do it again," she said. "If you don't telephone, I'll know it's still all right. But then, I was jealous too, you know."

He scowled moodily. "Of Astra?" he grinned then, with gay unabashed conceit. "That lady's after me, honey-chile, and at the moment she's jolly useful. Too useful. But wait until after we open. Then she can whistle for attention. Whistle and I'll come to you," he laughed aloud. "Perhaps!"

"How is she useful?"

"She's very attractive and knows all the right kind of people. The big people, my darling, the people who notice talent, who remember it and use it, the stepping stones one crosses to reach the other side."

"What's on the other side?"

"Success, my sweet, success. Then one is a big person

oneself. A buyer of talent, a producer of plays. Right at the top. That's what Astra is to me. The key to all these things. Though," he looked down at himself with a quick little laugh, rueful and amused, "I feel a little out of it, when I go among them in my old sports coat."

"Are you short of money?"

He laughed at her serious face, and kissed her again. "I adore you when you talk about money, sweetheart. You are so eminently practical. One day you shall keep all my accounts. Of course I'm short of money. I haven't paid any debts, or any rent, and my salary, when I get it, will be mortgaged for weeks to come. But who cares? When the first night is played—when that Rubicon is crossed, you'll see them heap money on me then. That will be the day." He changed the subject abruptly, "When are you coming to the flat again, Lydia? So that we can be alone again and love each other? If I telephone you one day, and say come—will you come?"

The colour flooded her cheeks, "Of course I will. But listen, Larry, I could lend you a little money, if you wanted some? If it would help until the show opens."

"Darling, a little is no use to me. Don't worry. I don't really mind about my old coat. Let's not talk about it."

"I could lend you fifty pounds."

"Fifty pounds?" he raised mocking and incredulous eyebrows. "How on earth did you come to be so rich?"

"Well, I save . . ." she did not tell him why she saved but he must know that she saved for the crazy wedding day she dreamed about, that was one day waiting for them. "After all, one day all I have will be yours, won't it? If it's any help, have it now. I don't want doileys and initialled towels and silver."

"Oh!" For a fraction of a second he seemed to hesitate, then he said carelessly, "All right then, I don't mind," as though he were conferring a favour on her. She had to laugh a little at his arrogance. "But it will be the first debt I pay when I get some money. I swear that. Look, darling, I must go. I've got to meet some fellows from the show at the Siddons club. Don't worry and don't fret . . . one evening I'll telephone, and say come, and you must fly to me, for I shan't be able to wait. Kiss me again . . . good-bye now, my darling."

She clung to him, desperately hungry for the thrill and

excitement of his touch, and as he set her down said quickly, "The money? Where shall I send it?"

"Oh, that," he had apparently forgotten it already, "I'll send a messenger to your office to-morrow afternoon. Good-bye again, my little love . . ."

He caught her to him once more, kissed her, kissed her hands, palms, knuckles and fingertips, and was gone. She watched the tall figure race across the grass, summon a taxi, and disappear, and smiled at his thoughtless extravagance. The *Siddons Club* was not ten minutes from the Park. She would draw the money on the way to work in the morning, and have it ready to send to him. She glanced at her watch and hurried back to the office.

CHAPTER FIVE

DARKNESS had just fallen—Greyfields Town Hall suddenly gleamed, its ponderous white shape, miraculously without bomb scars, floating in the flood-lighting with the exquisite airiness of a magic wedding cake. Ian set the big pile of sticks, surmounted by a rather grisly effigy of Hitler which Bunty had manufactured for Victory night, when they would all be home, alight, and the flames crackled and licked like golden petals against the night sky. Marte set the needle on the record, closed the lid of the radiogram, and the martial if melancholy strains of Lili-Marlene filled the garden. The crowd round the bonfire broke into a sort of pagan dance round the flames—there was a whole crowd of them, Jim, and some of the boys from his unit, Ian, uproariously excited, his grey eyes glinting, and his Scottish accent more pronounced than she had ever known. Lydia, beautiful in a full-skirted, short-sleeved dress of bright peasant colours, still lit by the exotic happiness that she had brought home with her last night, her eyes dark with a suppressed excitement and happiness, whirling about in a rustle of stiff taffeta, Bunty in a dress of Lydia's, white lilac a miracle in her golden hair, a crowd of Bunty's school-friends, Pat among them, making all the rest look extremely young in her sophisticated black dress, and long earrings glittering on each side of her shrewish little face. Robin, with a few of his crowd—the youthful flyers with their new wings, proud of their blue uniforms and

their R.A.F. standing, wishing vainly that they could have had just one operational flight to boast about. Robin, with the wonder-child he had brought, who was even now dancing with Ian, who had never danced in his life before. "Diane Gander—my—a friend of mine."

"My . . . ?" My fiancé? She wondered. Was that what had been on Robin's mind for the past few weeks? Standing on the lawn in the soft darkness with its noise and moving, glittering lights, Marte smoothed down her elegant grey dress, and doubtfully fingered the red-white-and-blue bow that Lydia had insisted on pinning in her hair. She was isolated here, in the shade of the big lilac tree. She had not missed the concentrated seriousness of her giddy Robin these last few weeks. Diane Gander. Andrew's daughter! That was rather funny, when one thought of it. Robin had no idea she knew the father, she had had no idea Robin knew the daughter. They had arrived in a taxi with a large variety of luggage, and an exquisite yet appalling little dog, which was even now shrieking its head off in the guest room. "May Diane stay to-night, Mummy . . . and for a day or two . . . I'll explain afterwards?" She had agreed.

She made sandwiches, salads, snacks and she and Lydia and Bunty piled them on the table. They lined the beer for the men along the wall, and made a mildly intoxicating fruit cup with the one half-bottle of gin for the girls. Lydia had flown about, like a blown flame, like a flower in the wind, Bunty in white, with the white flowers, had moved among a crowd of adoring schoolfellows, flanked by Ray, hot-eyed and intent, and Jim, blonde and tall, detached and watchful. They had all felt rather obliterated when Robin brought Diane in—like the stars at moonrise.

Diane had been upstairs an hour . . . during that time, Marte, above her frantic preparations had heard taps running, and Robin dashing on various errands. This then was the result. Five feet two inches of slender white girlhood, dressed in night-blue chiffon. Her long, shining almost straight hair, not ruddy gold and exuberant like Bunty's, but the colour of ripening oats, shining with a silver gleam, was caught back from her forehead with twin diamond stars. Round her slender column of a throat twisted a snake of diamonds, catching its tail at the soft base of her throat, a big deep sapphire in its head.

"That," thought Marte feebly, "if sold would buy this

house and several acres on each side, I should imagine." She thought of Andrew's words . . . "no real standards . . . nothing but money, display, men . . ." Maybe, but she was a real beauty. And when Diane took her hand with a confident little clutch, and said, "Oh, I've been so worried about meeting you. You're Robbie's mother. He said you were a good type, but you can't tell about mothers, can you, until you meet them?" Marte had laughed. It had charm as well as looks, apparently; it was sweet as well as vain. No use worrying about this new development to-night. Europe was at peace at last. John was on his way home. She began to pour the punch into the glasses, and with Jim and Lydia to help her, get the party going, and break up the absolutely stunned silence with which Bunt's school friends were regarding the vision of Diane.

Well, the party was well on its way now darkness had fallen. She stood watching them dancing on the lawn under the coloured lights. The air was heavy with the scent of syringa and early roses. Beyond the shrubbery the house glowed like a jewel—aloof, yet friendly, as though it shared their joy. How enchanting the girls looked, like bright moths, in their floating gowns. What were they all thinking as they drifted past? Lydia dancing with Jim, Bunt sailing by with Robin, Diane in the arms of a young American who was looking at her as though Veronica Lake had materialised for his special benefit. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ian stroll out of the bushes, shepherding a truculent Ray, and a resentful Patricia Hillman. Pat's lipstick was a trifle awry. Something about them, something representative of all the slackness and carelessness which she had allowed to creep into her own life, crystallised into action.

She pulled the needle off the record sharply, so that they all stopped and looked at her, startled. She said in a queer loud voice, "I've something important to tell you all. I've known now for some weeks, but did not tell you." The three children left their partners, and drew nearer. She put her arms out to them, "John's safe . . . your father's coming home."

They were crowding round her, hugging and crying, reproaching her for not having told them before. They made her go and get the wires she had received. For a moment all their personal ambitions and desires were forgotten. Then the dance went on again under the searchlights flickering like mad

aura borealis against the background of red fire. She turned and found Lydia next to her, so lovely and glowing in her coloured dress in the fireglow, that she caught her breath, caught it again with a little lovely rush of warmth, as the warm smooth bare arm slipped into hers.

"Mums, why didn't you tell me?"

By mutual consent they moved away into the house, into the lounge. It looked bright and clean and attractive with the walls distempered cream and the bright curtains and covers newly washed. Automatically Marte began to clear away the remains of the feast.

"Why didn't you tell me, Mummy?" repeated Lydia.

Marte looked up at her gravely. "We haven't been very good friends lately, Lydia. Why? I thought perhaps you were unhappy about something, and that was what stood between us. Was it?"

The colour ran up Lydia's cheeks, her hands automatically stacking plates. "No—I'm happy to-night," she said defiantly, as though she was determined not to have any doubt of that happiness. "Mummy, I ought to tell you, I think Larry Davidson and I are going to be married."

"Oh," said Marte cautiously, "you don't seem very certain? You'd better bring him along to meet me then—or better wait until your father comes. It won't be long."

Lydia looked up startled. She had not been to the office that day, but she had dutifully gone to the bank, drawn fifty pounds, and sent it registered and expressed to Larry. The fact suddenly seemed important . . . important in relation to Larry. She knew instinctively that John would not like Larry. Not that he had any prejudices against his profession, nor that he did not understand and hold dear odd, interesting and individual people, but he valued above all else honesty and truth . . . and Larry . . . She shut her mind resolutely. Yesterday among the red may trees she had recaptured happiness. She was not going to let it escape her again.

"Oh, Mummy, Larry's not the kind of person for family gatherings," she said impatiently. "He's different . . . I know *you'd* like him, people can't help liking him, although he does thoughtless and often unkind things. I wonder sometimes if he's been spoilt, because he's so good looking. But," anxiously, "when you're in love, you have to understand and have patience, haven't you. I mean it's all right so long as the real, central core of love is sound?"

Marte's heart ached for Lydia's youth and tenderness, remembering Mady's warning, and knowing that though Mady gossiped, she did not lie. "Yes," she said gently.

Lydia came quickly round the table, putting her arms round her mother in the old sweet way, "I've been so unhappy, mother." Marte's hands tightened comfortingly. "We quarrelled, and he was busy, and I didn't hear from him . . . I was dying to talk to you, but . . ."

"Well?"

"I thought you were not interested in us . . . that you were getting interested in someone else . . ."

"Lydia . . . tell me exactly what you mean?"

"Well," she hesitated, and plunged. "One evening when I was out with Larry I happened to see you in—in a taxi . . ." the colour burned up her face, and Marte suddenly sat down and began to laugh.

"Don't laugh. I was horrified!" said Lydia almost childishly.

Marte caught her hands, and drew her down beside her. "You saw me with Andrew Gander. You didn't by any chance see him kiss me?"

"Yes."

"Be sure your sins will find you out!" Marte said soberly, but there was a twinkle still at the back of her dark eyes, "When you have children of your own, Lydia, be sure you always remember they expect you to behave like a parent, and never like a human being. Lydia, I have been alone for three years, and sometimes I thought it was going to be for always. I'm not exactly tottering on the brink, although to you I suppose forty-five must be an age when the romantic passions should be well and truly buried."

Lydia looked at her mother, saw the vivid humorous face with its youthful dark eyes, under the pretty silvery hair. Saw the lithe, strong figure in its smart grey dress. Marriage, she suddenly realised, was a long job, lasting a long time. Perhaps one needed something more than the romantic passion to carry it through.

"It was wrong of me," Marte said frankly, "to go out with Andrew. I was fed up, frightened, and wanted to be fussed."

"You didn't have an affair with him?" Lydia asked, scandalised.

Marte glanced shrewdly at her daughter—Lydia was old

enough to understand truths, even if she was too romantic to relish them.

"No—but I might have."

"Mother!"

"He is very nice, very rich, and very fond of me," said Marte calmly, "But I had you—I tried to tell myself that you were all too old to need me, but I found that wasn't true. We all still need each other, families always do. They go on, always needing each other. So I examined the temptation, and found it wasn't one at all. This is my place, here. Keeping this home for John—and if John didn't come back, for John's children until they have no further use for it. I've given my job up, Lydia. It will mean less money, but I think it will be best."

"The cheek," said Lydia indignantly. "Trying to pinch my mother."

"Oh, that's not all," said Marte wickedly, "He asked me to marry him. Has your Larry asked as much?"

"Mother . . . !" she was angry, but she could not answer. Larry had never really asked her, not in so many words . . . Marte cut the last plank of security from under her feet. She was measuring Larry up against the Tredgolds, and he was not coming out so well. The Tredgolds. She had not thought much of them for a long while, but they were really . . . well . . . not just suburbia, as Larry so airily and contemptuously dismissed her background. She said suddenly, "How awful, Mummy, if you had left us, and gone to be a millionaire's wife . . . and John came back . . . how awful if we didn't have you . . ."

"I thought of that," said Marte quickly, "it gives me bad dreams still. You know, Lydia, women can do silly things all their lives . . . and it was Ian who helped me through that bad patch. I went to talk with him one day, and he brought your father back . . . just when I was almost *trying* to forget him. I had not heard for so long, it seemed as though I was needlessly hanging on to something that had gone. But Ian doesn't lose faith—he's pretty decent." She looked out of the window, and said, "Heavens, I'd better wash the glasses . . . the bonfire dance is over, and they'll all be dying of thirst."

She collected the glasses, and Lydia moved out into the garden. Bunty and Jim were gathering more sticks, to the great detriment of Bunty's dress, and nourishing the dying

flames. Diane stood watching, one arm in Robin's, who seemed, now the wild and obvious gaiety of the party had died down, grave and preoccupied, the other in Ian's. Diane glanced under her incredible eyelashes at Robin's serious face, and then up at Ian, who towered above her like a good-tempered Airdale watching a particularly precocious kitten.

"Robbie," she ordered, "Go and put some more music on . . . we all want to dance, don't we, Ian?"

"I'll go," said Lydia quickly. She put the record on, and turned to watch the dancers—Ian had never danced before, but under Diane's gay and skilful tuition he was managing very well. She suddenly saw him, all his young life, working and giving himself to others, but never before had any gay and graceful creature like this glamour girl of Robin's troubled to give him anything . . . but Diane was a spendthrift with her charm. Thoughtlessly and carelessly she was throwing him the magic of her youth and catching him up on the wings of her gaiety. "I never bothered," Lydia thought strangely, "I who have known him all this while and value him so much . . . she doesn't know what he is . . ." and starkly the thought came to her, "I'm *jealous*! Oh, it's ridiculous!" Jealous that a stranger should lay hands on something precious that belonged to her. Ian would laugh if he knew . . .

Ian relinquished Diane to Robin, and they danced away, cheeks close, bonny as a couple on a magazine cover, dark boy, fair girl, and Ian swung round, his big, thin frame with its familiar scarecrow outline, somehow a little wild against the bursting gold of the bonfire. He saw Lydia, standing by the radiogram, and came to her.

"Lydia . . ." he cried, "where have you been? Come and dance with me, I've acquired a new accomplishment."

She slipped into his arms, and they went across the grass through the moving shadows. A natural rhythm enabled him to move to the music, and his lameness was almost imperceptible in the slow swing of the waltz.

"Are you happy to-night, Lyddy?" he asked. "Is everything right again?"

She answered quickly, smiling up at him, "I saw Larry yesterday—everything is fine."

"I thought I saw stars in your eyes," there was a trifle of bitterness in his voice.

"How are the Perkins? The little corporal and his wife?" she asked.

"Be blowed to the little corporal and his wife," said Ian, "To-night the war is over . . . to-night I am not a solemn Scottish doctor to whom everyone comes for advice. I'm not the safe and sober young man to whom everyone confides their troubles. A beautiful girl has taught me to dance. 'Weave a circle round him thrice, for he on honey-dew has fed and drunk the milk of paradise . . .'"

She leaned back in his arms, looking at his excited face in the lights, knowing the wildness of Scots blood behind its dour exterior, of ragged, plaided men streaming through purple glens, and the romance of lost causes. It seemed in that moment that she, Lydia Tredgold, belonged to the conventions, and this big gaunt Ian belonged to a wild and fantastic breed which she did not know. She said, thinking to make him laugh, "Do you know, Ian, when that pretty thing of Robin's was flirting with you I felt quite jealous!"

"Jealous! Ye Gods, jealous! As you would be if she used your silver-backed hair-brush, or patted your favourite dog, I suppose? I don't like jealousy—but if I'm to have it, it's not that sort of tame stuff I'm wanting from you, Lydia."

They were standing in the shadow thrown by the dilapidated thatched summer-house, unseen by the other dancers. He lifted her up against him, crushing her fiercely, his lips hard on hers, demanding, desiring, taking. For a long moment Lydia was stiff with shock, then with a sound that was half protest, half surrender, she relaxed, yielding herself to the dark and fierce embrace, to the shooting stars of delight that exploded within her, leaping to her finger-tips. He set her down as swiftly and unexpectedly as he had caught her to him, and she reeled, catching the door of the summer house, her heart pounding, her eyes misty, a whirl of bewildered thoughts streaming through her brain. She had released a force that was overwhelming her . . . she stood a little breathlessly, gazing up at him, watched while the fire died, while the big hand touched her cheek, and he said unsteadily, "Lyddy—did I frighten you? I'm sorry—we're all a little mad to-night, and you are so lovely . . . forgive me, and forget it . . ."

The troop of dancers whirled near them, and Diane in passing saw them, ran over, snatched up Ian's hand, dragging him back into the throng. Lydia shrank out of sight in the old summer house, and crouched there among the dust and fallen

leaves, and rotting birds' nests. This—the one thing she had believed that only Larry could give—the overpowering joy of physical loving, the one thing she had clung to when every other quality he had had failed her—but it had been nothing, nothing, a furtive, cautious demand to the fleeting minutes of blindness and ecstasy and abandon she had felt when Ian had touched her lips. This too had failed her . . . this kingdom of the flesh, where she had thought Larry was the only king, had fallen at a touch. She stumbled quickly out into the night, breathing in great gulps of the cool air, and went up to her room, dropping on to the flowery ottoman, looking down on the dancers in the garden, her eyes and mind and every thought following Ian's great figure as it moved among the rest.

Ray stood in the firelight waiting until Bunty whirled past in Jim's arms, and taking advantage of the American custom of cutting in, tapped him on the shoulder. Jim surrendered her with a smile, and whisked Marte away from Robin. Bunty gave a little frown—she had been having a lot of fun with Jim to-night, but she could wish he had shown a little more regret in letting her go. His laconic, brotherly, attitude was often amusing, but not very flattering. But when Ray drew her into the shadows, she jerked irritatingly away.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she said, "this is a Victory night, not a petting party."

"Oh, come on, Bunty, don't be a spoil sport," he looked at the shining, vivid, vitality of her in the white dress, the white flowers in her brilliant red gold hair. The blue eyes followed the dancers eagerly, bored that the music was going on without her, "You ought to be a bit more up-and-coming, like Pat."

Bunty stepped out into the light, and he had unwillingly to follow her. Pat passing with one of the R.A.F. boys looked at them with dark venomous eyes, left her partner and came across.

"Have you told her, Ray?"

"Told me what?" Bunty was watching her mother, and Jim, among an applauding and admiring crowd, demonstrating a square dance, Robin and Diane got the hang of it and joined in, Ian followed with one of her school friends, Jim was calling the figures, "Set to partners . . . ladies to the middle . . . hey, have you a record of 'Turkey

in the Straw'? . . ." Bunty watched him impatiently, longing to go.

" Promise not to tell."

" Oh, all right."

" Ray's going to take us to that club, you know the one we talked about. He's bringing a friend of his to make up the four."

" Oh," said Bunty blankly. It had been such fun to-night that she had forgotten all about this clandestine adventure. It had somehow lost its glamour. She hesitated, and Pat showed her claws.

" Don't tell me you don't want to come, Bunty. After all we've planned, you're *not* backing out? I didn't think you could be so feeble."

" I'm not feeble . . . I just don't know . . . Mother wouldn't like it, and if father is coming back, almost at any time, I don't want to get fixed up with anything."

" You're just stalling," said Ray. " Have you got cold feet, or something? Pat's not scared."

" Neither am I, but I don't see when . . ."

" What about Thursday next? You told me your mother's going up to town to some swanky party?" insisted Pat, " You'd be back home before her and no one would know."

" Oh, all right."

Pat gave a triumphant little crow, looking at Ray for his approbation at her success, but was angry to find him gazing moodily at Bunty, rather like a gutter-urchin gazing at some particularly luscious sweetmeat on the wrong side of a plate-glass window. It was maddening that Ray had this thing for Bunty. Well, he would see. When he took them to this club he would see that she was only a kid under all that put on glamour. The square dance was in full swing now, and Bunty, unable to stand still any longer, tore away to join them. Pat waited, more like a hungry little black cat than ever, for Ray to turn to her in the shadows. She did not like this party—it was not in the least like the parties at home . . . it was more like a kid's party, and the grown-ups seemed to enjoy it just as much. There was none of the undercurrent of double meanings, the disappearing couples, there was little drink, and that dull. Nothing like the cocktails her mother made. They were ordinary, she told herself, and it made her sick to see the airs these Tredgold women gave themselves.

She found herself alone. Ray, as though under some compulsion, had gone across to join the dancers.

Lydia moved sharply from the ottoman as she heard the old familiar signal on her door. Two light, one sharp tap—it had once been the call to midnight feasts and adventures, for she and Robin being so near of an age had been sworn companions in a wild and imaginative childhood, when Bunty had only been a fat toddler, all right for an occasional human sacrifice, hostage, or imprisoned maiden, but quite unfit to belong to dark secret societies, where oaths were written in blood, and the penalty for betrayal was instant death or its horrible equivalent, being sent to Coventry. It brought her back with a sharp realisation that the party had moved from the garden to the lounge beneath, from whence came the clink of coffee cups, and the loud hum of voices. It brought her back across the years, it must be thirteen years nearly since Robin had tapped like that on her door—long before he went away to school and achieved a more lordly outlook and a superiority to the child's world of imagery, designating it firmly to the dust under the classification of "kids' games."

She had been sitting here over an hour in the dark, almost as though she had been hiding from the others, time slipping away in a confusion of thought, of self-accusation, of self-analysis, the scared analysis of the virgin heart. "I haven't known many men . . . Larry was like a whirlwind sweeping into my life . . . I had no other experience to check up against him . . . but to-night Ian kissed me, Ian, my friend, my treasured friend . . . and I liked it. I must be promiscuous . . . like that wretched little Patricia brat that Bunty goes around with . . . or perhaps I don't love Larry enough . . . it can't be that! It mustn't be that. It has meant so much . . . I won't believe it can vanish like smoke . . ." and she turned sharply to the door, grateful for Robin's interruption.

"Come in, Rob," she said quickly. "What's the matter?"

"Mums sent me up to tell you she's just going to serve the coffee, and would you come down?"

"Oh . . ." she nearly added, "Is that all?" For normally he would have yelled up at her from the foot of the stairs. There had been something appealing about that old, tapped signal, like a call for help. The room was in semi-darkness, the lights outside making a faint glow on the walls.

Lydia put her hand out and switched on the two lamps with their glittering lustres which stood on each side of her oval gilt mirror, little bits of luxury which she had saved for and bought herself, since she had been a child. Growing up with an idea of a home . . . a home of her own. Stupid, romantic fool!

The light filled the room, and she looked at Robin, and her heart softened with a certain misgiving. He was really only a kid, in spite of the uniform and the wings, and the sophisticated posings. His curly dark hair had come a little unstuck and ruffled, and his blunt-nosed cheeky face was curiously grave, and older . . . he had looked much older altogether lately. He stood, his hands in his pockets, as though he was waiting for her to say something.

"What is it, Rob?" she said quickly. "Did you want to ask me something?"

He looked up, with a feeble attempt at his usual cheery smile.

"I wanted to ask you to lend me some money," he said.

Lydia stared, and all external values forgotten, started in on him in a purely sisterly fashion. "Robin, you can't need money! You have all your pay to yourself, and mother lets you have an allowance besides. Personally I think it's pretty stinking of you to accept that when you know I pay into the house for my keep, and that Bunt's education is still to be paid for—and when mother gives up her work, as she's going to to get ready for father, I don't see how you can expect everything more. After all, you're not a child . . ."

"All right," said Robin grimly. "Cut it out. I know all that. All I want to know is—can you or can you not lend me some money? I'm in a jam."

"What sort of a jam?" asked Lydia quickly.

"I needed some money, Lyddy, and I borrowed it. I borrowed it from a gambling type who wants it back quickly, or else . . . fifty pounds."

"What did you need so much for?" she said frantically, and then saw the light. This Diane, of course . . . this lovely creature he had brought to-night. She had no right, she thought angrily, to expect a boy like Robin to live up to her sort of life. The Ganders were enormously rich.

Robin said sharply, "Whatever you're going to say don't say it. Diane and I are going to be married."

"Robin—have you told mother?"

"Not yet—I will."

"Robin . . ." she was just going to say all sorts of things, about youth, and insecurity, and unsuitability, when she thought of herself, and of Larry. Of the money she had sent him to-day. All her savings, handed out to him to spend on what? Was Larry any more suitable than this lovely, wilful, thoughtless child Robin was in love with. For he was in love, that was easy to see.

"Oh, Rob," she said unsteadily, "We are a couple of dopes. We're really not much use to Mum, are we . . . I mean over these years . . ."

Robin looked startled. This was a point of view that had not occurred to him. His single-purposed mind was intent upon one thing. It had never occurred to him since his father had been missing, that his mother had ever needed him. At that time he had wanted to help, but she had been so capable about managing and deciding everything, and so anxious that he should remain at school that he had not felt he was needed. That was, he supposed, why Diane meant so much to him—she was such a little flop, he thought gently, you simply couldn't imagine her managing on her own.

Lydia said quickly, "I'm sorry, Robin . . . I can't help you. I had some money," she flushed, and said quickly, "I lent it to a friend . . . In a week or so I shall have it back, and you can have it then . . . or perhaps we could raise something between us . . ."

Robin shook his head decisively, "No go, Lyddy. Never mind—don't worry, I'll raise it somehow. Just don't tell anyone."

"All right."

They went down together, Lydia helped Marte serve the coffee and hot rolls, and slowly the party began to go home. Everyone had gone, Ian had been called out to a patient a little earlier, and had gone while she was upstairs, without saying good-bye. She was glad of that—the colour burned under her skin when she remembered him and his strange wild mood. She had begun to accept him thoughtlessly as part of her life, a staunch and sensible part of it, and this new angle was terribly disturbing, and yet unreasonably she was sorry that he had gone. Diane stood by Robin, her eyes drooping as though the long dark lashes were too heavy for her weary white eyelids. Robin looked at her tenderly and anxiously. Buntz looked at them curiously, intrigued, but a little

contemptuous. Although love-making intrigued her, falling in love as such she regarded as rather a feeble attitude of mind, and to see her brother, Robin, whom even if he hadn't been in action yet, was a pilot, and whose sophisticated and swaggering presence had caused so much confusion in the hearts of her schoolfellows, looking a perfect drip, irritated her. Marte looked at Diane in all kindness, but felt rather as though someone had iced her a decorative and beautiful cake, too beautiful to eat. Lovely, but no good for frying up for breakfast, or hashing up for supper. Not an atom of utility anywhere.

"Robin tells me you want to stay for a few days."

"Please, if it's no trouble. It would be very kind of you." She glanced enquiringly at Robin. "Just until we . . . I mean I make different plans."

"Very well. Bunty has a spare bed in her room. You'd better sleep there. Bunty will find you some sheets and blankets. Now it's time we all went up . . . we all have to be out very early in the morning. Good-night."

She looked at them, and they all went forward and kissed her, and catching Diane's suddenly wistful eyes, she kissed her too, and was surprised to see them fill with tears. Heavens, one would imagine the child came out of an orphanage instead of one of the richest homes imaginable. She felt very tired. It had been a good party. Thank heavens the children knew about John.

In Bunty's room Diane regarded the folded clean sheets and pile of blankets with a faintly bewildered air, but as Bunty was pulling on a pair of utility pyjamas, there seemed nothing to do but to start making it. Bunty plunged into bed, and sat up again to brush her hair, watching Diane curiously. Pootzi, thinking it was a game, began to worry the corner of a sheet.

"If you don't tuck the edges under," Bunty said critically, "It'll come unstuck in the middle of the night, and you'll get cold feet."

Diane ignored this hint and stuck the blankets on flatly, bunged the pillow into its case and slung it on to the end. Bunty, frankly curious, watched her undress. Diane cast her shoes, her beautiful dress, underclothes the colour and texture of wild-rose petals on the floor, peeled off silk stockings, threw them on a chair. She scuttled over to her case, looking rather like a grown-up edition of "September Morn," and

Bunty's eyes popped as she opened it, displaying a complete chest of drawers inside, filled apparently with stacks of amazing underwear. She took out a clean pair of satin pyjamas, and put them on. She brushed out her hair, cleaned her teeth, took an enormous pot of pale pink cream, and cleansed her face, and rubbed oil into the base of her nails. Bunty watched with interest. Finally, Diane got into bed, pulled up the clothes, which immediately left her small feet pinkly bare.

"Damn!" she said, and drew them up sharply underneath.

Bunty grinned, she might be untidy and careless, but Marte had taught her to make a bed, not a crease nor untucked corner would Marte ever let her get away with. She relaxed, and stretched her hand out to the bedside lamp.

"Ready?"

"Yes," said the small, rather cross voice. Pootzi leapt up on to the end of the bed, just as the light snapped out on Bunty's bedroom, an unusual mixture of feminine frills, boyish utility, athletic prowess, and surprisingly, some reproductions of some very modern and interesting pictures. Bunty nearly said, but stopped herself, "Mummy loves dogs, but not on beds . . ." that would perhaps be inhospitable, and Pootzi was a lovely pup, though she would have preferred a bull-terrier herself. She said instead, "Do you always leave all your clothes on the floor?"

"It doesn't matter—I shan't be wearing them."

"Who," asked Bunty with interest, "does your washing?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, you'd better think about it here, if you're going to stay—the laundry tears things to bits, so we all do our own."

In the darkness Diane curled her chill feet beneath her, reached for Pootzi, pulled him up where she could feel his curly, clean pelt. Tears of self-pity and anger were welling up. They were nice, she supposed, but not like her people . . . she thought of her mother and shied away from that thought. At least her mother would not have let a guest make her own bed, she would have told the maid to do it. But she was an uninvited guest, and there were no servants here to wait on her. She wished she was married to Robin. She would not feel so horribly alone then.

Marte finished her work, and stood up. Twelve o'clock on

Saturday, and she had finished. She looked round the showroom that had been her daily scene for nearly three years, and wondered whether she would regret leaving. She had liked the life, and she had liked business, she had liked using her wits, and making capital out of her inherent good taste. But it seemed narrow now—as though she had to throw open a door and conquer a new world. An old world really, the world of home.

She bade a formal good-bye to the blonde first assistant, who to her great surprise nearly wept, and then rang through to Andrew's secretary to ask if she could see him. He was waiting for her in his office when she came up. She had not seen him since their last interview, for he had been out of town, visiting one of his provincial stores. She thought he looked haggard, and worried, although his eyes lit with the old welcome when she appeared.

"Come in, Marte," he said quickly, "and have a cigarette. I've been dreading this day—it's going to be hard to replace you."

She looked at him critically. "That's not all, is it? What's worrying you, Andrew?"

He sat down on the other side of his desk, with a defeated little expression. "Family troubles—no, not my wife. My daughter. My wife telephoned me yesterday. It seems Diane has run away with a young officer from a training station near their home. Her mother thought that lack of money would bring her back in a day or so, but apparently a week has elapsed and she has had no word. I did not know anything at all about this. My wife, as usual, is beginning to panic now, instead of taking a firm line with the child earlier."

Marte stared.

"I know it's idiotic to worry. She's sophisticated enough, too darn sophisticated, but after all she is only nineteen. What are you laughing at, Marte . . . I may seem rather foolish, worrying about Diane, after leaving her to her own and her mother's devices all this time . . . What is there so funny in it . . . stop laughing, Marte!"

"I'm sorry. It struck me as funny. My Robin is the culprit, and Diane is even now staying at my home."

He rose to his feet, "At your home?"

"Robin brought her home to our victory party and asked if I minded having her for a few days. Of course, I agreed. I could see they are very much in love, but I didn't dream

they were contemplating matrimony. He's not passed his final training yet, and he's only twenty—I don't know where the war will take him, probably to the Far East, but it's almost certain he'll be tied to the service for some years."

He paced down the room, his quick mind looking at this new complication from all angles. Presently he came and sat quite close to her, taking her hand. "I don't mind, Marte, if the boy is at all like you he must be all right."

"I've spoiled him," said Marte firmly. "It's my own fault. He was always a captivating urchin—still is."

"I imagine so," his eyes were warm upon her, "Diane's as choosy as her father, thank goodness. Funny if we were fated to be related as grandparents . . ."

"Help," Marte said protestingly. "As an admirer you shatter my ego at every turn. But don't run ahead. Robin has learned nothing but warfare and flying. He'll have to start right from scratch when he returns. Your exquisite Diane is already beginning to wilt a little after a few days with a family which has to wash its own smalls."

"Well," he said easily, "that can be looked after."

"No," Marte's hand came sharply down on her chair arm, "it's all in the air now, but if there were any foundations in their marriage plans I am not going to allow you to pave Robin's way with gold before he starts. I've done him enough harm, because—oh, because his father wasn't here, and he was my only man-child, and I was afraid I might lose him too."

"Marte," he said quickly, "why couldn't I meet you when you were nineteen? I even envy John his term in Jap hands because he's coming back to you . . . look, my dear. It's no use us trying to direct these young people—they are young, but old enough to work things out themselves. But will you do me a favour—let Diane stay as long as you can stand her. I'm sure your influence will help her, will do her good."

Marte rubbed her curly hair in the familiar, puzzled way. A week with Diane had been a problem already. Bunty, tidy by training, if flighty by nature, was already complaining about the avalanche of expensive, once worn clothing that was filling her room. Diane apparently never wore an undergarment twice, a dress unpressed, and had always had some one to collect and clean them. Pootzi had no respect for shoes or cushions, and Marte, remonstrating, had been told she

"didn't understand the darling. He's so wildly high-spirited!" On one occasion she had allowed Diane to do the marketing she had indulged in luxurious desserts bottled in wines, and brandies from one of the most expensive stores, and was really hurt when it had been suggested they made gaps in the household budget. Still—from to-day she would be at home herself.

She said, "Diane can stay until John comes—it should not be awfully long now. By then she and Robin should have made up their minds about the future."

"And you haven't forgotten my party next week? Will you bring them both? I'd like to have a look at this boy of yours."

"Very well. I will."

But when she arrived home, she found only Bunty, angry and rather alarmed, packing away the stacks of once-worn undies into the luxurious travelling bags, hanging the pretty dresses in the cabin trunk and putting away the shoes.

"Where's Diane?"

"Gone. She took her small case and said she'd send an address for these to me to send to. Gone back to Momma, I suppose."

"Bunty—have you quarrelled with her?"

Bunty turned a crimson face, "I told her I was just about sick of living in a pigsty, and that she might be pretty, and she might be rich, but she was just plain useless to anyone, and I thought Robin was a drip to take anyone like her on."

"She was a guest here, Bunty."

"I'm sorry—I got mad," she was silent, and then burst out, "I can't see why it is that I'm not allowed to do a single thing. If I'm late an hour I get ticked off, and yet she came and went exactly when she liked, and made everything in a mess, and . . ."

"I said—she was a guest. Anyway, she was two years older than you are."

"She went to nightclubs when she was sixteen—she told me."

Marte smiled, guessing that jealousy on Bunty's part had aggravated this split. She put out her hand, but Bunty flounced angrily away. Marte sighed. Bunty had been difficult lately—one minute her adorable, affectionate self, the next flagrantly disobeying every rule of the house. She looked round the room—it was like taking possession again, after

years away. Well, she would start in first on the house, then on the garden, she would start in on the children too—everything must be shipshape before the captain came home. First she must telephone Andrew and tell him Diane had gone. When she heard his voice, she began, "Andrew . . ."

"It's all right," he said, "She's here, howling her eyes out about her 'uselessness'—something that's never occurred to her before. I shall still expect you—and Robin next week."

Lydia sat at her desk. Everyone had gone. Before her was a newspaper—a Sunday newspaper with a notice, "Thursday at 6.30, Cymbeline, King of Britain, with Astra Grey, and the new young sensation, Larry Davidson . . ." there was a short sketch of Larry's brief career, with emphasis on his brilliant war record. There was a picture of him, a press photo, dark, polished, laughing, with a lightness and gaiety that his real personality did not hold. Underneath this there was talk of a film offer, and a big contract. It seemed like a door shutting between them. As though this life of the theatre and film that he had determined to conquer, had opened out and swallowed him up. "I don't know him," she thought, "I haven't seen him—once in a matter of weeks."

She was trying to be honest with herself. She had not seen Ian either, not since her mother's birthday, and his wild, exciting kiss, and that had been strange, for she had missed him deeply, as some important part of her life. Larry's life, the glamorous life he had adopted, and which never once had he offered to include her, seemed as far as a foreign country. They were to be married—how could they be married under such circumstances. How could he marry her, and yet keep her away like this. Whom had she missed most, Larry or Ian . . . was she afraid of meeting Ian now? Had that evening put an end to their old, friendly, uncomplicated relationship? Was she afraid of meeting Larry—afraid that she had whittled at him, and now there was nothing there—the empty shell. The complete egotist, playing a series of perfect parts, but no real person to hold, no real lover, only a creature like Narcissus, entranced with his own wonderful reflection.

Lydia looked from the newspaper to the two seats in her hand—she had to know, she had to get this thing clear. It was incredible, and unbelievable that all that passion and suffering, that hungry longing for Larry could go, and leave

nothing at all. She must see him, and see if there was magic there to be recaptured. She picked up the 'phone, and asked for a line—the switchboard girl put her through, grumbling, for she was on the point of leaving. Lydia called Ian.

"Ian," she said, "I have seats for Larry's first night to-morrow—can you come?"

He was silent for a moment, then he said shortly. "Very well."

"Same place, and time . . . good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She put the receiver down, trying to analyse the curious hard inflexion in his voice, so unlike Ian. Then she stuffed the tickets in her bag, and went downstairs, summoning a taxi outside the office, and gave the man Larry's address in Chelsea.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE TAXI drove Lydia to the familiar street in Chelsea. She got out and paid the man, then crossed to the Embankment side and stood looking up at the tall grey houses. It was a lovely evening again, very like that evening of love and strange humiliation when he had left her to go to Astra's. She stood hesitating, not wanting to cross the road and go up to the flat, knowing she was faced with a decision, and knowing in the depths of her mind what it would be, yet even now trying to believe she could recapture that first thoughtless delirium of loving. The window was open in the flat high above, and a curtain blew out idly in the breeze. She thought she saw someone move behind the window, and her heart seemed to contract sharply, but not with joy—with a sort of fear. She had a panic impulse to run away, and never see Larry again, then the poignant memory of their meeting only a day or two ago came back in swift reality, and she crossed the road, and went up the long flight of winding stairs to the flat and knocked quickly, before panic should seize her again. She heard footsteps moving about in the flat stop at the sound of the knock, light footsteps, not Larry's, and wondered if the charwoman were in there cleaning. Then they came to the door, quick and light, no charwoman's footsteps, and before the door opened she knew who it was. Astra stood there, looking at her. Her blonde hair hung to her shoulders, she wore a scarlet shirt and sandals, and a pair of blue dungarees. She had a duster and a pile of books in her arms. She looked very beautiful, and incredibly domestic. She regarded Lydia coolly, and in spite of her youth, and her crisp summer dress, Lydia felt ruffled, clumsy, unprepared and inadequate.

There was a moment's silence, then Astra said with the smiling charm for which she was famous, "Oh, you're Lydia, Larry's pretty friend. Do come in," as though it were her flat. "Larry isn't in at the moment. He's gone to have his costume fitted again, and I'm afraid everything's rather confused, one way and another."

Numbly Lydia followed her into the flat. It was like being in a strange dream. Her errand was neutralised into a deep humiliation. She felt like someone who had called indignantly

to collect a debt, or obtain redress for some petty wrong, and had been met with a calm disinterested politeness. She looked round the room. A packing case was in the middle of the floor, and Astra had apparently been occupied in removing Larry's books from the shelves and packing them in the case. She pulled a chair forward hospitably, pushed forward a box of cigarettes, and when Lydia was seated, went on with her job. Lydia watched her, fascinated.

"Is there any way in which I can help?" Astra asked graciously, "I haven't any idea when Larry will be back. He's all up in the air about to-morrow night, and not fit to speak to."

Lydia hesitated again. Her voice seemed to have deserted her. She did not feel anything, not pain, nor jealousy, nothing but a vague kind of bewilderment, like being in a queer confused dream, yet knowing it was a dream and longing to wake into reality. The most bewildering part of it was that even to her it seemed to be quite a natural thing that Astra should be here, and the agonising jealousy she had suffered before when she had seen Larry in her company was entirely absent. She heard her own voice say, conversationally, "Is Larry moving, then?"

Astra gave her a quick look under her heavy lashes.

"Well, we thought my place is much more convenient, and so much larger, that it would be better for him to move in right away."

The dream broke, and she was awake again. Useless to say it did not hurt. It did, deep and awful, in her heart, but she knew it was not pain of broken love. It was humiliation, it was disillusion, something that had been exciting and beautiful she had treasured, and which she had discovered to be worthless. Regret and hurt, but no pain, no desperation, no loss. She thought automatically, "I've not felt that way about him, not since Ian kissed me."

"Larry and I were married yesterday," said Astra quietly.

Lydia rose sharply, and went over to the window, gazing blindly and unseeingly out upon the quiet street outside. Astra was speaking again, with a quiet triumph, and yet with a curious touch of sympathetic understanding. "He ought to have told you. I was afraid you might be upset. But we want to keep it a secret for as long as we can, until the show is well launched, anyway."

Lydia did not answer. Her mind was back in that day in

Green Park, such a little while ago. Only a few hours as time is measured. Why had he done it? Why had he worked so hard to rouse in her all the old hopes, the sweet emotion, the deep passion? Even while he had held her in his arms, and had said, "I am hungry for you, Lydia . . ." he had known that in a few days he would be Astra's husband. Was it true? Could he want two women at once? Or was it just that he was hard up and wanted money? But he could have asked her directly for the money—if she had had it, he must have known she would have given it to him willingly. He did not have to pretend to love her for that. Or was it because she had kept away from him. That he saw his magic domination fading in her eyes. That when he telephoned he knew her voice had changed, that there was a critical understanding and comparison rising in her heart, and his vanity would not let her escape from the trap without attempting to bind her to him forever. She knew suddenly that it would have pleased him if she had gone through life unhappy and still loving him, that it would have satisfied him to have seen her occasionally, or to have made her his mistress carelessly, that he thought of her and wanted to think of her as a pretty little thing who adored him, and whom he could whistle back again for an hour when he was bored, and had nothing to do.

But he had not done that to her. She was quite free of him—she had been free of him for a long while now, and it was Ian who had freed her. She would not think of that now—that was something which had to be faced. One owed so much to Ian. Because he had been so near, so familiar, so much part of one's daily life, one had accepted from him thoughtlessly, comfort, strength, wisdom, taken them without a thought . . . until that other night when he had taken her into his arms. But now she no longer felt the fear, the hesitancy and humiliations, but just a quiet sense of well-being, of safety, of having arrived safely home.

Astra said, "Larry is a flirt, I know. I'm sorry if he has hurt you. But you're very young, and very pretty—you'll get over it, you know . . ."

Lydia swung round, and Astra was silent, surprised at her smiling, cool, amused face. There was no shattered heart here, but someone very free and young and lovely, like a bird that has escaped imprisonment, ready to wing its way out through the blue sky.

She fell back a little, her triumph and assurance a little

shaken, not quite knowing what to say. She had fought hard to get Larry. Was he so little worth the having after all?

Lydia said proudly, "Well, there is not much point in my seeing Larry," she moved towards the door, "Thank you for being so very frank with me. I came to find out where I stood. Now I know and everything seems beautifully clear and simple."

She held out her hand and said quickly, without rancour or envy, "Good-bye. I hope you'll be very happy, and I hope the show is a great success."

She went quickly down the stairs, and out into the sunshine. She felt extraordinarily free, not quite knowing whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

When she arrived home Robin was there dressed in the flannel trousers and sports coat that indicated some leave. She stopped in the sitting room doorway, and watched him. He was sitting at the bureau in the corner going through some papers, and she saw something had changed in him—something boyish and young and thoughtless had gone. The dear face with its snub nose, and brown, boyish look was serious and intent.

He looked up, and gave a little inviting jerk with his head.

"Here a minute, Lyddy."

She went and sat down on the arm of his chair, and he pushed his cigarettes over to her. She took one, looking at him curiously.

"What's going on here? "

He looked up. "I'm on leave—got through the course all right. I'm waiting to be posted."

"Where? "

He shrugged. "Far East—SEAC I expect. It's the only thing. I'm young and I haven't done a thing yet. It's time I did my share of fighting."

Lydia felt her heart give a little skip, as though the long miles of sea and land already stretched between them. She thought of Marte who had nearly lost John to that mysterious Far East—a hungry yellow dragon, waiting to eat these men of theirs, these dear ordinary men, whose life should walk in known paths, familiar and safe. Was life giving father back, just to take Robin away?

He said, "Look, Lyddy. I've been sorting things out, and going through everything. I want you to do something for me. There are one or two debts, not very much, that have

to be paid. But there's this one to Ian, which must be paid regularly."

"To Ian?" she said slowly.

"Yes—I told you I was in a mess? Well, I'm out of it. Ian lent me the money. I'm going to send it to you. I don't want mother to have to do with it, she'll have enough to do with the house, and Bunty and father coming back." He paused, suddenly grave. "I hope he gets back here before I leave. I'd like to see him." He did not say how he had needed him, how he had missed him, but in that moment it was tremendously real between them. "I've told her to halve my allowance. When I've got these off my chest, she can cut it out, and I can manage on my pay. It will be some time before Dad gets the practice going again, and she'll need the money. But I want you to settle up these debts, and to pay Ian for me, every month, until the money I owe him is paid."

"What did Ian say when you asked him?" she said quickly.

"About me? Nothing," he smiled. "He's a good scout. Simply handed it out to me and told me not to be such a darned fool again. When I tried to thank him, he said he was luckier than I am in one way, that he had John when he was my age, but that I was luckier than him in another way."

"What was that?"

"That I can go out and fight, and that John is really *my* father." He looked at her, and the newly acquired maturity relapsed, and he was a boy again, impulsive and tactless. "Lyddy, Ian likes you awfully, and he's just about the most decent person there ever was. It seems absolutely haywire to me for you to go running around after this actor chap, when . . . well, when you might have Ian . . ."

She rose sharply to her feet, shutting him out. She did not want to talk about Ian now to anyone. She owed him so much. She heard his voice again . . . "You're jealous as you would be if someone borrowed your silver-backed brush . . . or patted your favourite dog . . ." Would he ever believe now that she could turn to him from anything but use and gratitude. If she could meet him again freshly, and tell him of this newly found love that was in her heart? Love? Yes, love—not the painted canvas of glamour and desire, and hidden, mysterious adventure.

"If it's any satisfaction to you, Robin, I'm not running after that actor fellow any longer. He's married."

Robin flushed angrily. "And he didn't tell you. I'll punch his damned head."

Lydia laughed—she had a vision of Robin, cocky as a terrier, challenging the elegant Larry. "It's a bit late now," she said. "It's my head you should have punched a month or two ago. Are you going with mother to Gander's to-night?"

"Yes," he coloured a little. He would see Diane again. He had not heard from her. He did not know what she was doing. But if he knew Diane she was back at the old life again, surrounded by every luxury, an adoring parent pandering to her slightest wish, surrounded as she always was with men and admiration. But was he going to see her.

Lydia went upstairs to her room. Larry and Astra seemed long ago and far away, like a fevered dream she had once dreamed. She looked down at the notes in her hand that Robin had written, the debts she had to pay for him. She had not known whether she had wanted to laugh or cry. She knew now. She wanted to cry, because she loved Ian, and suddenly she seemed farther away from him than she had ever been.

The taxi drew up at the entrance to the graceful Georgian house. There was no awning outside, or carpet across the pavement and up the steps, or any of the peace time indications of a superior west-end party, but cars and taxis were drawing up to the door, and people were going up the steps, elegant, well-dressed people. Robin looked down at himself, and then at his mother with some satisfaction. Of course his one ring looked a bit bare when you saw an air commodore wafting up in front of you, but Marte looked fine. The dinner-dress was old. She had had it, like most of her clothes, for some time, but it had been pretty special when she had had it, and it would be special until the end of its days. It was velvet—a deep, dark red that very nearly matched the two great red roses she wore on her shoulder. They both looked at each other, and gave the swift, humorous smile of understanding that belonged specially to them, both thinking that the other was terrific, and reassuringly letting each other know.

"Flying high," Robin said a trifle glumly, "I wish I'd seen all this before I met Diane."

She gave his hand a little pat, a little at a loss, knowing he must work all this out for himself, yet wanting to help him. They went in together, and found Andrew waiting for them.

He shook Robin's hand, his eyes scanning him quickly, the trim taut figure, several inches smaller than himself, then he said, "Go and find Diane . . . she's dancing somewhere, and I know she's been waiting for you. Marte, what will you have to drink?"

"Well, what is there?"

"Some champagne? I can recommend it. I've been hoarding it for years. First of all for peace, and then for you. I didn't think it would be drunk at our farewell party."

She took the glass, and drank a little of the fine dry wine, then turned, looking down over the marble balustrade at the dancers below, looking round at the flowers, at the well-dressed crowd of socially expert people. This was Andrew's kingdom. It could have been hers if she had wanted it, but it was no longer desirable. She knew what she wanted now, clearly, and she wondered suddenly about John, thinking of all the hardship and pain he had been through, and all this unspoiled luxury seemed wrong. She had received several letters from him now, cheerful letters, telling her a little of what had happened since he left Singapore, telling a little of the dangers, but nothing of the long and dreadful sufferings, the hopelessness and the privations. She was hungry now for the sight of him, for the longing to have him home to take care of, to love, to make up for these long and bitter years. It would only be weeks, maybe days before he returned. Drinking the champagne, touching the roses near her cheek she was miles away from the elegant room, and the elegant company and the charming, well-dressed man beside her.

"A penny for them?" he laughed.

She laughed. "Oh, Andrew, I was wondering if John's clothes would be back from the cleaners by the time he comes, and whether he will have enough socks."

His eyes softened.

She asked, "Have you made any plans?"

"Yes. My divorce goes through, just the same. Diane will live with me, and take the responsibility of the house—I don't think we shall keep this on. We'll have a less formal home."

"And Diane—what does she think. Has she mentioned Robin?"

"She's eager to take on the responsibility of the house, and she talks a lot about Robin. But I'm afraid she's still inclined to look upon him as she would a longed for possession. Something that she wants and if she sulks and wheedles and schemes long enough she will get. But he doesn't look at all that kind of young man to me."

Marte sighed. "They must work it out for themselves. He is waiting to be posted. Does she know that?"

"I don't think so."

"It's going to be hard for her—she's so young and so attractive. Perhaps it would be better for them if nothing was fixed."

"Have you found it that way?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said quickly, "I've thanked God for the years of married life before this separation . . . but mine were years—theirs will only be hours. There is a difference."

"Not really. It depends entirely on the people—on their strength and truth, and Robin, in spite of his youth is very like you. Just one thing, Marte, before I ask you to dance with me."

"Well?"

"I feel like Mephistopheles—but has it ever meant anything to you—knowing me, and all these things I might have given you, if you had let me."

She looked into her glass thoughtfully, thinking of the pleasant dinners, the meetings, the feeling of being able to relax and enjoy things, little gaps of peace in the strain of loneliness and carrying on. She looked up at him.

"It has meant a lot, Andrew—it was a break for me. But your friendship meant more."

"Marte—even if we aren't to become in-laws, will it be possible for me to meet John one day? I have been jealous of him, but now I feel we could be friends. I've asked myself, when I wanted you so much, what he had that I hadn't. Now I know."

"What is it?" she bantered, as he put his hand under her arm and lead her to the dance floor.

"Just your heart," he said gravely.

Robin stood at the buffet watching Diane as she moved among the dancers. He had not danced with her, although she had waved an apparently carefree hand at him over her

partner's shoulder. She looked prettier, he thought, than she had ever looked, and most incredibly young. She had a dress of white chiffon sprinkled with blossoms, as though someone had carelessly tossed a handful of them across the full, floating skirt. Round her slender throat was a ribbon of azure blue velvet, with an old-fashioned painted miniature set in diamonds, its neat oval shape accentuating the lovely slenderness of her neck and shoulders. Her hair glimmered and shone on the lights. She was surrounded by admiring young men. There was not a moment when she was not surrounded, laughing and talking, and she had not seemed at all unhappy. Not like he was, with jealousy and with loss. It had flared up into a promise of beauty, and now, looking at it soberly, he saw it was quite impossible. Diane was here, in her element—obviously enjoying every moment of the evening. Beautiful, superlatively well dressed, the centre of attention. All right, let him face it honestly. He loved her. He was young, and he would get over it, but even then the magic of her childlike loveliness would haunt him through those long and arduous days ahead in the steaming jungles, in the high-flying planes, and afterwards, through his life, even through marriage to some unknown girl. He stopped sharply, alarmed at the long corridor of thought and loneliness, haunted always by this dancing ghost of lost joy. It was a stupid way to think. What did the fellows say at the mess, the fellows who had fought. Trite terse little sayings "written off," "got the chop," "Gone for a Burton." Grim little words when you analysed them, but good enough. Death was a big thing when you faced it day by day, it was better to face it like that. Love was a big thing too. You had the chance of it, the love you wanted, perhaps once in a life-time, and if you could not have it, well then, you had better write it off and forget all about it. He was wasting his time here. Better forget about it, and go away. He would get a taxi, and go down to the small service club he belonged to. It was only a small shabby place, but the fellows dropped in there, and there was always someone you could see and talk to. He would not stand here, drinking champagne and being a dope. He would have a few beers, and talk, and then he would get a taxi and come back here and pick up Marte when she wanted to go home.

He stubbed out his cigarette and went purposefully over to the door, meaning to catch Marte's eye, and tell her he

would come back for her. He waited impatiently, and finally gave it up. She would not want to leave for a couple of hours or more anyway, and he could leave a message with one of the servants. He was crossing the hall to get his cap, when Diane appeared, as though by magic, by his side.

They stood, looking at one another.

"Well?" he managed to say.

He thought she had been happy and triumphant to-night, but looking at her now, he could see her eyes were full of tears.

She said, "Are you going, Rob?"

"Yes, I was."

She said, like a lost child, "Don't leave me," and all at once all the old tenderness welled up into his heart. He could not bear her to be hurt. He put an arm round her, they were in the hall, and no one was near, and he drew her closely to him, and for a moment the delight of being together again, swamped every other consideration.

"Look, Diane—is there anywhere we can talk?"

"Yes, in here."

She led him into a small study off the main hall.

"This is Daddy's home office, where he sits and worries about expenses. No one will come in." She shut the door, and stood looking at him, waiting for him to start.

"Well, here we are," he said, just a little wearily, "Back again. Loving each other."

"Isn't that something to be glad about?" she whispered.

"Not always," he said fiercely. "Not a bit when it's impossible. I stood watching you Diane, to-night, and it's no good. I cannot and probably never will be able to give you these things that are part of your life, and that mean so much to you. Our sort of love would be all right for a honeymoon, but afterwards you would blame me for taking you away from all these things that mean so much . . . You must know I've not even any training for any civilian work—when I come out I start from scratch, and by then the field will be a pretty big one."

"But Daddy will help . . ." she began.

"Your father doesn't enter into it," he snapped. "If you married me, you'd be my wife. You'd have to live on my income."

Diane opened her eyes wide. No one had ever spoken to her like this in her life before.

"I've been thinking of it, and thinking of it," Robin went

on. "And to-night I realised it was no use." He went across to her, and put his arms round her tightly, "Maybe we are only young, but I'm going abroad soon. If I'm old enough to do that, I'm old enough to think for myself. We've got to grow up sometime. I know I love you. I always shall. But your way of life is different to mine, and it seems to me too big a gap to close."

Her arms went round him, holding him close—he could see the button on his tunic making an indentation in her soft cheek. "Robin, I've been thinking too—about us. I've tried to tell myself, like you, that it won't do, but I know it has to do. I love you. I know I'm useless and spoiled, but I could be better if I tried. I can learn to be a real person, like your mother . . . not an imitation one, like mine."

He said, in a panic, "Diane—I shall be going away soon, for a year, perhaps more."

She looked at him solemnly. "That will be a trial. I shall be twenty perhaps when you come back. Then you really know whether I shall do."

He said gently, "You'll do," and kissed her.

The curtains descended, and Lydia sat back with a little sigh, her hands clasped and her eyes bright with excitement and interest. She had no personal feeling about the performance at all—she had been watching the birth of a reputation. With Ian once she had helped at the birth of a baby—the birth of reality. But this was no reality—this is what Larry could have given her, but she could have this from Larry without even knowing him, without suffering any of the pain of his vanity, worthlessness, and faithlessness. She had seen a perfect performance, as far as his work went he could not be either worthless or faithless. In that he was whole, giving his best, giving everything that was in him. His was not the longest part in the play, yet like many great actors before him, he knew it was the best, and through the evening his performance had flickered, dark and subtle and sinister against the fragility of Astra's Imogen, until one sighed restlessly when he was not on the stage, and longed for the graceful, crimson clad figure to return again.

She turned to Ian, and smiled, and they rose, as the curtains swung back, and the cast came forward to take their bows. A voice at the back of the house called Larry's name; and it was caught up, to and fro across the house, until Astra, with

a little graceful gesture, made him go forward before the rest of the cast and he stood alone, taking the applause, his dark face alight with happiness. Lydia looked at Astra, saw she was beautiful, and more than a little bewildered, and she wanted to turn to Ian, to hold him tight, to thank him for coming into her life, for making her see the difference between reality and make believe. Otherwise she, and not Astra, might be sitting here, admiring, and yet bewildered, knowing that this was his world, and that he would never belong to another, certainly not to one woman or to one love.

She said to Ian, "Let's go, before they play the anthem—these calls are going on for hours yet."

They had end seats and were able to slip away easily. In the vestibule while Ian got his coat, Lydia saw the purposeful and excited figure of Aunt Mady, formidably gowned in purple velvet for the event, tearing from the auditorium towards the back of the theatre. She saw Lydia and bore down on her, her thoughts torn momentarily from the wild success of her production to the broken heart of her niece. She pulled up sharply.

"Well, Lyddy, how did you like the show?"

"It was wonderful, Aunt Mady. I am absolutely thrilled."

"Well, then, come along to the party at my place. That's my car outside. Hop in, and I'll be with you in a moment."

"No, really, I must be getting home."

But Aunt Mady was not to be gainsaid. Poor child. It was only right that she should have a good time occasionally, and if that young brute Larry Davidson had been ignoring her, now was her chance to get them together again.

Ian came towards them, carrying his hat and Lydia's light summer coat. Lydia introduced them and Aunt Mady again renewed her invitation, including Ian. He looked at Lydia quickly, his level grey eyes touched with query, and she very slightly shook her head.

"I'm afraid we can't manage it to-night," he said crisply.

"I have to be back to see a patient . . ."

"But, Lydia!" insisted Aunt Mady.

"No, Aunt, not to-night."

They were walking along together through the cool summer dusk. He did not question her, and she wished he would. Since her mother's birthday there had been this queer cloud between them. She could not bridge the gap of gratitude. She wanted him to come to her, not knowing how that fine

and graceful figure on the stage to-night had tormented the lame man. The newspapers had said, "Larry Davidson, Air Ace and Actor." He who had not fought, he who was lame, who had toiled patiently through his hum-drum days . . . he who must look huge and raw beside that crimson clad elegance—how could she turn to him. He knew that whatever had been between Lydia and this handsome actor was over now, but he did not want her to turn to him as a second-best love. He who, perhaps, had no right to be arrogant, who knew how to be humble, could be arrogant in this. He loved Lydia, he would have all of her, or nothing at all. He knew she would turn to him now, as all people turn from pain and insecurity to a dependable friend, but he did not want her like that. He could be her friend, yes, even though the very thought of her burned in his heart, but he must not give way to the temptation to take her, to love her, reaping the harvest of her disillusion.

As they approached the gate she turned to him, and put her hand on his arm. "Ian," she said, "perhaps I should not have asked you to go to-night. We—we haven't been such friends lately. I don't know why, but I want you to know how grateful I am for what you have done—for Robin and all of us. I promise it will all be repaid."

He said quickly, "Don't, Lyddy . . ."

"But, Ian—it wasn't just the money. It was a sort of understanding sanity you had, you gave us . . . just when we needed it . . ."

He smiled, and for a moment she saw how drawn and taut his face was under the pale light of the lamp. "Lyddy," he said quietly, "you don't have to be grateful to me for anything. I have loved everything I have ever done for you. Good night."

Lydia watched the tall figure, with its odd uneven walk go away into the darkness, and her heart seemed to go with him. Go with him, filled with dismay and unhappiness. She would never make him understand now. She turned and went in at the door, and found her mother standing there, lovely in her deep red dinner dress, her face white and drawn with distress.

"What goes on, darling?" she said quickly.

"Lyddy, is Ian with you?"

"He's just gone, why?"

"Bunt is not home. Robin's gone to look for her. He's

gone down to the billets to see if he can find Jim, he thinks he might know where she is."

Bunty waited on the corner of the busy crossing, feeling rather silly. It was ten o'clock and being double summer time it was still broad daylight. It was all very well going out in evening clothes, like Marte to-night, in a taxi, accompanied by Robin looking very handsome in his best uniform with all his buttons polished. But to stand here in Lydia's floral evening dress, with your own rather battered white sandals, and a sports coat thrown over your shoulders, was just plain silly. She ought to have known it would all be a flop. But Pat and Ray had plugged their exciting pictures of a sophisticated and Bohemian sort of evening, and had challenged her to go with them, so she had agreed. She stood debating uncertainly with herself. She had wanted to go, and yet she had not. She had felt different lately. A month ago it had seemed a wonderful thing to defy authority and court disapproval. A month ago it seemed as though everyone, the whole family and Jim and Ian had been conspiring to keep her a baby. Now she was not so sure. A month ago she and Pat had laid war to men, and she had thought to be provocative and outrageous had been the way, but now she was not so sure that it had roused the sort of attention she had wanted, from the sort of people she liked. Jim, for instance, had not been a little bit impressed, and Jim, whatever Pat said, was not a stick-in-the-mud. Not by a long way. The party on victory night had really been fun, more fun than anything else she had known, far more fun than any of these parties at Patsy's, and there had been no drinking, no petting, no suggestive jokes or talk, nothing but dancing and fun and friends together, and yet she had been happier on that night than she could ever remember.

A car drew up near the kerb, a long, black, polished, impressive flashy car. Pat was sitting next to the driver, a dark, rather good-looking man, in civilian clothes whom Bunty did not know, and Ray was sitting in the back. He opened the door as the car slid to a standstill. Pat turned excitedly to Bunty. She looked pretty, very thin, very excited. She was wearing her black dress and a lot too much make-up, a red flower in her hair, and her nails lacquered scarlet. Bunty gazed at her incredulously, she looked so

different from the girl in school uniform to whom she had said good-bye a few hours ago.

"Sorry we're late," she crowed, "The boys came round to my place and I mixed some drinks. This is Ralph Henderson—a friend of mother's. He's come to make up the foursome, but he won't split. He knows the place. He's a member, so we can get in without any trouble. Oh, Bunty, I'm so *excited*."

Ray put his arm round her, and drew her back against him in the seat, and Henderson turned, gave her a casual smile and Ray an encouraging wink, before he started the car and they drove on again. Suddenly Bunty was frightened. Right deep down inside her. She could not back out. Not now. It would be too silly and childish. But she did not like it. She did not like either of these men, and she did not like Pat any more, her friend of such long standing. She suddenly saw why her mother and the teachers at school did not like Pat. She was a menace, because she could not do anything alone. She must have someone to share her guilt and her risk, she must take someone along with her—she wanted companionship, especially when she knew she was doing wrong. Bunty's mouth set with a look of Marte, refused Ray's offer of a cigarette, and sat up straight.

All right. She had said she would come. Well, she was here. She would go with them and dance at this place, but after to-night, never again. Never again would Pat persuade her into doing something she did not want to do. She looked at the two men, the car and suddenly thought of John and Marte and was ashamed.

Ray put his arm round her shoulder again, and said, "What's eating you, honey? Don't be a spoil sport. We're all going to have a swell time. Don't spoil it by being stand-offish."

Bunty twitched her shoulders away. "I said I'd come, and so I'm coming," she said crisply, "Although I must have been mad to agree. But why you think I enjoy you hanging round my neck, Ray, I really don't know. So don't do it."

Henderson laughed, and said, "Hard-to-get, eh? That's how I like them." Then everyone laughed.

Pat said, "Oh, she'll feel better when she's had a drink, won't you, Bunty?"

Bunty did not answer. She thought grimly, "I shall never be anything but ashamed of this as long as I live."

They drove a short way out of Greyfields to some mean streets along a road where trams and buses clattered, and into the driveway of an old house standing alone among some trees, and the aimless driveways of other properties, long since bombed and demolished. It seemed eery and lonely to Bunty.

Henderson drove quickly round the drive of shabby bushes and shrubs, into a wide space where several cars were parked. Near to, the house presented a different and slightly more inviting prospect. The door was apparently the only one in use, for it had been painted, and the steps whitened, and there were some curtains of some shiny red stuff at the windows. It was more reassuring, like some kind of country club.

Henderson parked the car, and they all got out. Out of the car and straightened up he proved to be a tall man, in a smart suit with too many stripes in it, and highly polished shoes. He went up to the place with assurance, and they were let in to a wide, furnished hall where they signed their names in a book, and went on downstairs into a large room with a dance floor and a band crammed up against the wall in a sort of red fretwork cage. There was a bar, and a wide staircase leading to a first floor gallery, supported by arches round which brilliant artificial flowers climbed.

In spite of herself Bunty began to feel excited. There were crowds of people present, girls in pretty dresses, civilians and men in uniform clustering round the bar and packing the dance floor and the surrounding tables. The imitation roses looked real and romantic enough in the dim rose-coloured lights. White-coated waiters moved about with trays of food and drink, and everywhere was the soft beat of the drums, and the soft shsh-shsh of the wire brushes, and occasionally the soft rattle of the gourds when a rhumba was played.

Henderson had booked a table, and Henderson apparently had some big pull with the management, because the waiters hovered as soon as they were seated, and drinks appeared as though by magic. Bunty did not drink hers, although Pat did greedily and rose almost at once to dance with Ray. Henderson turned to Bunty, and smiled at her, with a little paternal look.

"So you didn't really want to come?"

"No."

"Why?"

Bunty hesitated childishly. She did not want to admit that

she was too young, or that her people would not like it, or that she was afraid. But under his easy, bantering air she began to relax. Perhaps she had been silly to be stand-offish. She did not want to be a prig.

So she said quickly, "I just don't like Ray."

"Oh?" he took her hand, and gave it a friendly little pat. "Well, you don't have to. He can get on very well with Pat, and you and I are going to stick together, and I'll take care of you. Drink that up. It won't hurt you—it's three parts water, anyway. Then we'll dance."

All her prejudices seem just a little silly. Nothing could happen. Why she could walk right out of that door and be home in half-an-hour. She obediently drank the cocktail before her, pulling a face at its sharp burning tang—it did not seem so innocuous as Henderson made out. Then she rose to dance with him. As they moved out on to the floor he met Ray's eyes above her head, and he favoured him with a profound, meaningful, and triumphant wink.

Robin stood outside the big old house where Jim was billeted. It was after lights out, and the whole place seemed dead, and he hesitated, not wanting to disturb anyone, or to explain what his errand was. If he got his hands on Bunty, sixteen years or not, he promised himself he would give her the biggest hiding she had ever had in her life. He had already tried Pat's home, but found it deserted, presumably Pat too had picked an evening when her family were out. The fact that Bunty had taken one of Lydia's dresses showed she had gone dancing somewhere. Of course there was no point in panicking. She was probably perfectly safe, but she had no right to go off like this without telling anyone. Marte was worried as well as angry, for it was only too apparent that Bunty had expected to be in long before they returned.

If she was with Jim he would be disappointed but relieved. He would be disappointed that a decent lad like Jim should encourage her in such idiocy, but anyway, with him she would be safe. It was that little bit of riff-raff Patricia Hillman that he did not like. A cheap job if ever he had seen one. He gave a sigh of relief as he saw some soldiers, apparently on a late pass, come up the road towards the gate.

They looked at him with curiosity and slight amusement, when he said, "Look, I want to get in touch with Corporal Jevons. Will you tell him Mr. Tredgold would like to see him."

The GIs, rather tickled at the sight of an R.A.F. officer wandering round their quarters at that hour were inclined to be facetious. One said that Jim was an early bird and probably fast asleep. Another spoke with an affected English accent to the delight of his pals, "I say, doncherknow, this is all fratefully irregular, old sport."

Robin's friendly grin flashed, amused for the moment. Then he said, "Look here, chaps, Jim's a pal of mine. It's damned important."

In a few minutes Jim, sleepy, anxious, a jacket over his pyjamas came to the gate. Robin explained in as few words as he could, and saw Jim's young impassive face grow grim and angry.

"Ray's on a late pass," he said. "And they've gone to that damned Crystal Club for a cinch. They've been talking about it for weeks. I thought Bunty had more sense, but I couldn't squawk on her. The damned little fool."

"Where is it?"

"On Faulkner Avenue."

"I'll go over there."

"You won't get in—you're not a member."

"I'll have them raided if they don't let me in. Bunty's under age."

"Okay," Jim smiled as though the idea of a scrap suddenly attracted him, as though he would enjoy hitting something hard.

"I'll join you in a minute. When I've got some things on."

It wasn't until later, some minutes later, when Jim had joined him in the road outside, and they were walking together in silence and determination, that Robin thought to ask. "I say—is it all right for you? Have you got a late pass?"

"Nope," Jim said grimly, "I came over the wall at the end. I couldn't get the sarge up at this time, anyhow."

"Look here," remonstrated Robin, "You'll get into trouble. Go back. I'll sort this out."

Jim shrugged. "You may want some help," he said tersely. "Besides, Henderson is with Ray to-night. I know that much, because I saw him pick Ray up in his car."

"And who is Henderson?"

"Friend of the Hillmans'. And just about the biggest rat. that ever lived."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROBIN AND JIM walked rapidly through the darkness. There were no buses running, and no taxis now. They walked quickly, and in grim silence together. Robin, very smart in his best uniform, Jim with his things thrown on anyhow, a unity in their purpose, both very young, both very determined.

As they came to the space where the bombed houses spread their empty, desolate spaces under the night sky, they could hear, very faintly, the sound of dance music.

"Have you been here?" Robin asked sharply.

"Yeah," said Jim. "Once. It's a fancy joint. Not much good. This sort of thing doesn't go down with me—too many dark corners, and too many kids whose mothers ought to spank them," he paused, and then said disgustedly, "I thought Bunty had more sense."

Robin glanced at him sympathetically. They felt old and masculine and together, irritated by unreliable whims of the female sex. Thinking of Marte, Jim said suddenly, "I guess women have to be mothers before they get any real sense."

In the hall of the Crystal Club the man at the reception desk hesitated, "I'm afraid we only admit members."

"We aren't staying," Robin said quickly, "I have just called to pick up my sister. We shall go immediately."

"In that case perhaps I could find the lady for you. We are not allowed to let non-members into the club premises."

Jim and Robin glanced at each other, not quite sure how a summons would affect Bunty. She might be glad to get away. She might on the other hand be very angry and annoyed. They both had a vision of Bunty with her wild blue eyes flaming, being extremely grown-up and indignant at the interruption.

Robin said quickly to Jim, "I don't care. She's only sixteen. Whether she likes it or not, she's no darned right to go to a place like this without mother's permission. She's coming home if I have to haul her by the neck."

"Atta boy," said Jim. He turned to the little dark, watchful receptionnaire. "I think Miss Tredgold is with Mr. Henderson." He opened and closed his hand, a young, hard brown hand, flexing the fingers critically.

"Mr. Henderson," the attendant repeated, and his black eyes flickered with vague alarm.

"We'll wait five minutes," Jim said.

The attendant whispered to a page, and the page disappeared through the arched doorway, and the sound of the band came out in a wave of thick, warm colour, and faded again as the door closed. Robin and Jim stood silently, regarding a large display poster of a group of young ladies smiling coyly, and clad scantily in feathers, who were obviously the more solid part of the floor show. The dim red room was like a cage. The receptionaire regarded them nervously. Presently the page returned.

"Neither Miss Tredgold, nor Mr. Henderson are in the club," he said.

Robin and Jim regarded the undersized urchin until he visibly paled.

"How much did he give you to say that?" asked Jim quietly.

"Nothing . . . this is, I haven't seen . . ." his eyes dropped, then went frantically to the older attendant, who immediately hurried forward.

"Now, gentlemen, we don't want any trouble. You have your answer. The young lady isn't here. There's nothing else we can do for you."

Jim jerked a sharp elbow into his chest, and as he fell back they both walked forward, thrust open the red painted arched door, and went down a few carpeted steps to the edge of the dance floor, the page and the receptionaire panting and protesting in their wake. It was after time, but drinks were circulating pretty freely, and several people were quite drunk. The two young sober faces, one blonde, one dark, but both with that curious blunt-featured, straightforward look of youth moved round the room. The receptionaire and now the manager were frantically at their elbows, wildly protesting.

"Shut up," said Robin. "My sister is here and she is under age. If I don't find her I'll get the police in and close the place up."

The manager cast his hands above his head with despair, sent the page to find the commissionaire, changed his mind, appealed to their better nature, asked them to remember his reputation, and finally told the page to go and get Mr. Henderson.

Jim looked round. "That's the bird we want to—so he is here, after all?"

The manager realised his mistake, tried to talk his way out of it, when Robin caught Jim's arm. "There's Ray—over there—with that Hillman child. They'll know where Bunty is."

They went together straight across the dance floor. Pat was sitting with her head in her hand, her black eyes stupid and dazed. Ray saw them and rose quickly and truculently to his feet.

"Hallo, fellows? Trying to barge in on our party?"

"Hallo. Where's Bunty?"

Ray shrugged. "She's just left."

Pat suddenly sat up straight, and looked firmly at Robin. She was fairly drunk, and drunk she looked horribly and pitifully her age. All her bravado and sophistication had gone. She looked exactly what she was—a skinny, naughty little girl in a dress much too old for her.

She said slowly. "Beautiful Robin, beautiful Robin never looks at me. Beneath his dignity," she huddled her bare shoulders up like a chicken, trying to find warmth, and said mournfully, "No one really likes me. Ray likes Bunty, Henderson likes Bunty, even Bunty thinks I'm awful."

"Where's Bunty?" said Robin sharply.

"Upstairs with Henderson."

Jim looked at Ray, and his face went white with sudden temper. He hardly seemed to move, but Ray went down on the floor, his shoulders jolting, his heels flying up, a chair and glasses crashing down with him. Someone screamed, and there was a sound of broken glass, and people shouting. Attendants and waiters began to crowd round, people were shouting and pushing, some scared, some eager to watch a fight.

"I'll go up and get her," said Jim. "You get that little tramp out of here, and I'll join you outside. I'll find Bunty."

He pushed his way through the crowd and was up the stairs at a jump while Robin, angry and disgusted, hauled Pat unceremoniously to her feet, and towards the open air.

Jim went up the steps two at a time. The first floor was a wide circular gallery, dark in comparison to the glow on the dance floor below. He stood at the top of the steps, peering around in the darkness, cursing the noise below, trying to listen. He could just distinguish an open French window

giving on to an outside balcony. He heard a scream, sharp, and furious, and Bunty's voice, and made towards it, just as a slim figure in a long floral dress flashed out through the door to his side.

It was Bunty, not drunk like Pat, but livid and trembling with fury. "Who is that?" she said tersely.

"Jim."

"Oh," she relaxed, a curious little laugh, half ashamed.

"Rescue party? Did you think I needed one?"

"We thought you might. We haven't time to talk. We've got to get out of here."

She put her hand in his, suddenly scared, suddenly very young. "Jim—I . . ."

"You what?"

"I've done an awful thing. I bopped him on the head. That beast, Henderson. With a flower-pot—a heavy flower-pot. You don't suppose I've killed him, do you?"

The anger and emotion in Jim suddenly exploded into a little spurt of laughter. He put his arm round her shoulder quickly, and gave her a warm, friendly hug. Bunty put her head down on his shoulder and said in a stifled voice, "Jim—I've been such an utter drip."

"Sure you have, but skip it anyway. Let's have a look at this guy."

He went back on to the balcony, just as Henderson sat up, feeling his sleek black head, and groaning, the blood running down on to his immaculate shirt and collar.

Jim looked at him delightedly. "He'll do, Robin's outside with Pat . . . but . . ."

There was a confused noise from below, whistles and shouts, and bright unshaded lights began to flick on all over the building drowning the artificial pink lights, and the cloying sentiment of the atmosphere. Everything seemed to burst into a tawdry, ugly reality.

Henderson came blundering past them, his hand holding a handkerchief to his head, barely seeing them. "It's a raid," he said sharply, "The police . . ." he stumbled down the stairs, shouting to the waiters to get the bottles and glasses off the table.

Jim gave a little whistle, then turned, "Come on. Let's try this way."

They ran out on to the balcony, and looked over, the drop from that height looked terrific. He glanced at Bunty's long

skirts and slender young figure and found her hitching up the dress, hurriedly dropping her high-heeled shoes over on to the ground below.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

Bunty nodded, "I'm going down, aren't you?"

"Down there?"

"It's no higher than the chapel roof at school. There are good strong vines. Come on."

She was over the balustrade, and shinning carefully down a pillar before he could answer. Cautiously he followed her. She found her shoes and put them on, felt ruefully over Lydia's dress, and stood waiting for the next move.

He said quietly, "And I was afraid you couldn't look after yourself."

"Jim," her voice shook a little, "You needn't have worried about that. But you were right, about not taking me here, and telling me not to go. It's not fun, and it's not funny, it wouldn't be even if you were old. It's horrid. It was because I wanted to be clever, and show off. But the awful thing was, Jim, I *might* have liked it . . . for a moment when we first came, I almost did like it. I might have got like that . . . like all those silly people chasing something not real, and not good . . ."

"Hey. No point in crying. You're O.K. now. Come on. Let's find the others."

They found Robin and Pat on the roadway, Robin dignified, furious and silent, Pat abject and scared. He didn't look at Bunty, but turned on his heel, and the peculiar, silent little procession wound its way home. Pat they left on the way. It was on the way up Greyfields Road that the jeep pulled up, and the lamps shone on the white helmets of the M.P.s inside. The voice said casually, "Got your pass, Corporal?"

They stood watching, Robin and Bunty, while Jim was driven away . . .

Robin burst out suddenly, the first words he had said to her. "He'll probably lose his stripes over this. One of the best fellows you could find. There was no need for him to come and help to lug you out to-night, and this has to happen. I hope you're satisfied."

It was then that Bunty really began to cry.

It didn't get any better at home. Marte was still waiting.

She did not say anything, or want any explanation. She merely said, "There's no point in talking about it to-night. Take off Lydia's frock, and we'll all go to bed. Good night, children."

And she went upstairs without another look. They went up one by one, Bunty creeping up into her room last of all. She went to her bed and sat looking at the floor, and wishing it would open and swallow her up.

The morning was bright and clear and sunny. Bunty had shot out of bed and into the bathroom before she remembered last night, and Robin's anger, and her mother's tired, sombre look, and Jim's arrest, and her heart suddenly dropped like lead into her boots as it all came back. She remembered that it was gymnasium day, and put on her clean white blouse, and short navy tunic, and tied her hair back with a plain bow. She looked at it despondently. She seemed to have grown away from it since last night, and yet it was nice to wear it again. It stood for something that had stood her in good stead. If she had been the cause of Jim getting into trouble, well, anyway she had not been a hopeless drip in getting out of it.

She went downstairs into the sunlit, white and blue kitchen, and sat down at the breakfast table. As she did she heard the telephone ring and her mother's voice in the hall. No one spoke until Marte came in and sat down. Her expression was a little strained, puzzled. She said, "That was your father—he's arriving to-morrow." They all stood up, excited, all talking at once. She hushed them with a gesture, so that they all sat down again, gazing at her anxiously. Marte faced their curious young eyes, "We've been apart for three years. It's a long while. We've all changed. I wonder will he expect us to have changed?"

"People must change in that time, Mummy," said Lydia quickly.

"Yes, but how . . . look back over this last three months, at all of us. When I knew he was coming home, I tried to begin altering things. I gave in my notice. I turned to the house and the garden, to make things look better, but it isn't that, it isn't that. You're older now, and soon you'll be breaking away, but you've got to build up again . . . the house of family life, that we had. You've got to make it whole

again. It's not easy. It's easy to build something quite new, but not so easy to build on an old home, repair it, put it back. But somehow we have to . . . and you have to help me."

Lydia bent and put her arm round her mother, saying quickly, "It's all right with me now, darling. You know that, don't you?"

Marte patted her hand gratefully, "I thought it was. Good. And you, Robin?"

His blunt, boyish face that she loved so much was grave.

"I'm all right too, Mummy. I've settled everything. You haven't to worry about me. Only one thing . . ." he paused. "I'll be a good while away. If you can help Diane, you will, I know. It will be long and boring for her . . . and she's pretty young. I'd like her to come here, and get to know you all, and father too . . ."

"Of course, Robin."

Lydia went upstairs to get her coat to go to the office, and Robin out to the garage where he was tinkering with the car in an effort to get it running to meet his father . . . the news that he would be home to-morrow made time short. Like everything else Marte thought—the car had been laid up for three years. It would take some time, patience and work on Robin's part to get it running again. It would take time, patience, work and understanding to get everything running again, to build forward, and yet at the same time to build backwards. Never again perhaps would they have those sunlit, careless years, when she and John had lived and grown together closer every day, but with God's will they would have something better, something finer, finer because they had suffered for it, and it was so much harder to obtain. But something in her said childishly, almost heart-brokenly, "Don't be disappointed in us John, give us time."

She gave a little sigh, and turned to find Bunty standing looking at her with a tight mouth, and very bright eyes. She smiled, "You'd better hurry up—you've only got half-an-hour before school."

"You're not going to be cross with me for last night?" said Bunty in a stifled voice.

Marte suddenly put her arms round her and held her tight.

"Bunty—I was angry last night, but I was more frightened than angry. I was frightened because what you did, or the fact you wanted to do it, was really my fault. My place was here, and I should have known it—it would have meant doing

without a lot of things for all of us, but doing without does not hurt you really. There are a lot of things you'll have to learn, Bunty, that I should have been teaching you, instead of leaving you to . . . to experiment so wildly by yourself." She rumbled her hair, "I was thinking of you still as my baby—I suppose somehow I always will, even when you're grown up and married . . . but of course you're not. I think perhaps, Bunty, it's you who should be cross with me."

The rigidity of Bunty's mouth did not relax. She gave her mother a taut little hug, and went out to school.

At break Pat sought her out, looking heavy-eyed and pale but lit up with excitement.

"I say, Bunty, I had an awful time. Robin just pushed me in without any explanation, and father was in. I thought he was going to be mad, but mother was there, and talked him out of it, and told him she knew where I was and was going to fetch me. Was your mother mad?"

"No," said Bunty slowly.

"Oh," Pat pulled her curl reflectively, and went on, "It was fun wasn't it? So long as we did not get into a row it's all right."

"That's just it," said Bunty fiercely. "It's not all right. It's all wrong and beastly, and I hated it, and what's more I hate you, Pat Hillman, and I don't want to go out with you any more, or have anything to do with you."

Pat looked surprised.

"Oh, I don't know," she began. "It's a pity Jim got into trouble but it was his own silly fault . . ."

"It was not!" Bunty turned on her with such vehemence that she fell back in dismay, "It was our silly fault. We're just as silly and stupid as we could possibly be. Trying to be grown-up, and just imitating the silly rotten grown-up people who never really do grow up . . ."

"Why, Bunty . . ."

"Don't talk to me any more. I wish . . . I wish I could have this year back again . . . I'd have done so many other things."

She stalked off into school again. They broke up at three and Bunty presented herself to the class mistress, asked to be let off tennis, and on being given permission, marched fiercely down the road until she came to the house where Jim was billeted, and approached the man at the door.

"I want to see the officer in charge," she said whitely.

He looked at her, at her brief gym dress, and her tense little face, and grinned, "Well, and what would it be about, lady."

"It's about Corporal Jevons who was arrested last night after leaving the Crystal Club."

The large soldier looked at her facetiously, as though he was looking at a very little girl.

"And what do you know about the Crystal Club?" and to his enormous surprise and embarrassment Bunty's icy calm broke and she burst into tears.

"Here—! Hey, what's the matter?" he asked worriedly.

"Don't do that, or folk will think it's my fault."

"But it's all my fault. I know it doesn't make any difference to him being out without a pass, but he wasn't there . . . I went, and he knew I oughtn't to be, and he came to get me out . . . so you see there are reasons why he shouldn't be punished . . ."

The soldier took her to a sergeant, and the sergeant took her to an officer, and they all heard her, very solemnly and kindly, and managed not to laugh until she went, because what had grown to an enormity in her mind during the day's school hours seemed just so much kid's mischief to them. But it explained to them why a good kid like Jevons should apparently go haywire and then refuse to talk.

Marte stood in the crowded station, watching the train come in. It seemed as though she had been there for hours. The train had been late, nearly an hour's delay, and then there had been a special in, which she had been sure must be the right one, and searched up and down the carriages in vain. She tried to analyse her thoughts and found she could not. She was not desperately excited, and felt guilty at that, as though she should have been, and then was angry with herself for worrying because she at forty-five, did not feel like a bride. But she wished anxiously for him to come. Robin was back with the car, and he came occasionally and stood by her, and then went back again to the car.

Finally it came, steaming down from the north, and the packed mass of uniforms came swarming out, and she went slowly forward, looking, looking among all those faces, and then at last she saw him, alone, walking slowly with a stick, a porter carrying his bag. He saw her at the same time, and at once the old familiarity, the dearness and nearness of the

long years flooded back over her, and she ran forward, her arms outstretched, and they clung together. He only said one word, "Marte," and put his face close to hers, and the tears were not far away from both of them. She did not know what to say. The years were still between them. On his side the horrors and hardship, on her loneliness, boredom, making do. She took his arm, and they went together from the station, her mind darting frantically about, wanting to give him something, to make him feel as though he had really come back, and she couldn't think of anything until Robin stood at the car door, and she halted, remembering that Robin wore a school cap when John had said good-bye to him. And now he stood there in uniform, with wings on his breast.

They stood, Robin smiling all over his smooth brown face. He was shorter than his father, sturdier. John's blue eyes lit up, as they shook hands, and then unashamedly hugged, "Why, son . . ." he said slowly.

And Robin said, "Father . . . it's great to have you back."

Going back in the car with John talking to Robin, talking shop about aircraft and warfare, about the Pacific, about the fall of Singapore, about the yellow men that Robin was so soon to fight. Marte sat listening, her hand tucked into John's, still frightened by the sense of unreality—as though she had longed and hoped for this for so long, and now was not quite sure of herself. Not quite sure that the time had not been too long, the way apart too wide, herself too unsure. She and John had been so together, so long ago . . . and now there had been these years, the children altering, her life altering, there had been Andrew . . . she wanted something, something to tell her that it was all right. She watched his face, noticing with compassion that he was thinner, his hair was thinner, that his vivid, very definite personality had quieted down, as though he was waiting for something, and yet there was also something stronger about him, as though he had been through fires which had stripped everything away but the bare realities, and because of this he could see more clearly and more directly than they who had stayed at home.

He did not talk much. Her hand lay in his, he looked eagerly at the shabby London they passed through, the bombed-out buildings, the seething crowds, and she prayed desperately that he did not find it strange and disappointing, that he would not find them disappointing.

They turned up Greyfields Road, and passing the billets at the end, Marte caught a glimpse of Jim, lounging along with his loose-limbed Yankee walk, free and easy, his stripes still bravely on his arm. He saw them and waved. She said lightly, "A young American that Bunty knows," and in the driving mirror saw Robin's face relax with a little smile of relief.

Up to the gate. They had rehung it, and painted it, and Bunty and Lydia were sitting on it, waiting, their bright summer dresses two splashes of colour. But it was the plate in the middle that brought a little shock to Marte's heart. She had not thought of it. But there it was, screwed firmly into the gate, shining and brightly polished, like a seal upon the future. "Dr. John Tredgold, Physician and Surgeon." Who had thought of this while they were out? She could guess. Ian. He knew about realities. There it was, the symbol of their old life, the promise of the new. She watched John's glance go in surprise and admiration from one pretty girl to the other, and then rest, amused, but happy on the shining brass plate on the gate. She felt a great wave of choking, deep emotion flood through her, so that her hand tightened automatically on John's. He turned, and regardless of the children, and everything around them, kissed her, close and firm, fusing all the confused past and present together.

It was all right. The doctor was home for good.

A day had passed, and evening had come again . . . the long light summer evening when there was time to rest and play. People had dropped in to see John, old patients, old friends. Ian came and he and John had been together in the old consulting room for hours talking, talking endless medical shop, of new conditions and discoveries, new drugs, the unbearable glut of work to which there seemed no end, talking about altering and redecorating the waiting room and consulting room, about the new plans, and the new proposals which were in the air.

Lydia and Marte set the supper, and about seven Jim came in and Bunty completed her prep, and went down into the garden to him. She coloured a little when she saw him, and said, "Father's gassing with Ian, and Robin has gone to call for Diane. Would you like to play tennis?"

They went over to the hut together to get racquets, and pick over the best of the old tennis balls. He said quietly, "Thanks

a lot for speaking for me, Bunty. It would have been all right in any case, because our chief's a pretty swell guy. But it was grand of you to come."

Bunty went crimson. "I made an awful fool of myself, howling all over the place."

"Why worry—everyone is liable to do that, sometime or other."

She looked up. "I seem to have wasted an awful lot of time, Jim. We could have had good times, instead of squabbling. But I want to say I'm sorry—you were right."

He put out his hand silently, and they shook. The colour came up under his freckles, then, and he said awkwardly, "You're pretty swell, Bunty, and awfully pretty. I'll be going home soon, and then maybe to the Pacific, as I never made this German business. When it's over I'm going to be an engineer, although this war has put me back some."

She looked at him, big-eyed and serious, her golden hair a shimmering halo round her head. It had been a curious day at school. A lot of things had cropped up. She had been nominated for head girl to her utter and confounded surprise. The next shock had been Pat Hillman. Pat with no lipstick, no giggles, sidling round her with awe and respect in her pleading eyes. Pat saying, "If you'll still be friends with me, Bunty, I'll do anything you say." And the queer feeling of strength this admission had given her.

Jim was talking to her now, saying things with meanings she could only guess at, but quietly and honestly, without any of that challenging half-attraction, half-hostility that had been between them. They could have had a sterile, dead-end boy-and-girl romance, and found a lot of furtive excitement which would have lead them nowhere. He was telling her how much she meant to him, but that between any real coming together there were years of uncertainty and endeavour, that might or might not be bridged. That they were too young, and had met too few people to make promises, or think of any future life, but that she meant a great deal to him.

She said seriously, "I'd like to write to you, Jim, and I hope you'll write to me."

It was the answer he wanted. He said, "Thanks a lot," and bent forward and kissed her gravely, just on the edge of her soft young mouth. Nothing more. A little pledge between them, not of any definite promise, knowing the odds against

them, of change, and years, and the unknowable were too great, but it was very sweet, and it held a whole world of hope, the untarnished, bright hope of youth.

"Come on," he said, and they went out, swinging their racquets together in the sunshine.

Diane felt rather as though she was being presented at court. She had, in her short life, met a great many celebrities, and many very rich people, but as she and Robin crossed the edge of the shabby lawn to the little stone terrace where John sat in a big wicker chair, watching the tennis players, she felt she was facing a critical test. She had learned during these last few weeks the respect and admiration Robin had for his father, and in her mind it had taken on the aspect of an ordeal. John rose, tall and lean, and smiling easily, stretching out his hand to take hers in a firm, welcoming grip. He said, "Hallo, Diane," and then glanced at Robin, smiling with swift congratulation. "This is a fine thing to do to my susceptible heart, just as your mother and I are beginning to get settled again. Robin, go and get us a drink."

He settled again in the long chair, putting up the leg that had been injured on the long rest, and patting the empty space at the side, so that she sat down comfortably near him. Diane sat down, and he watched the beautiful little face waiting quietly for him to speak. Meeting his kindly, humorous, understanding eyes, she felt a sudden sting of tears.

"Well," he said, "Am I very alarming?"

It came out with a rush. "I was frightened you would be disappointed in me."

He laughed, "Give me a chance, Diane. At the moment I'm too dazzled to form any adequate criticism."

She lifted her long lashes, and said, "You're teasing me?"

His long, wise, blue eyes were very kind. "No, I'm not teasing, Diane. You are beautiful, and you are a dazzling person to descend out into the work-a-day world."

She said nervously, "It isn't a matter of descending. I sometimes think it's quite the other way about. When I see Marte and Lydia . . . they're so almost frighteningly competent . . . they never run to anyone for help. They can do without things and not complain, and get on with things—bravely. I've never had to be like that. Until recently—I've never wanted to. But now I want to, but I wish Robin was not going away. I'd like him here to help me,"

"But we shall be here to help you."

She frowned a little. "Yes, I know. But it's you I want helping with." She looked up soberly, and said, "I don't think Marte was awfully happy about me at first. She looked at me as though Robin had bought an expensive car which he couldn't afford to tax."

John's laughter welled up again, but it was sympathetic laughter.

"It's not what we are, Diane. Most people are poor creatures at best. I'll tell you something—it wasn't you that worried her, it was Robin, I think she was wondering whether she'd made a good job of bringing him up while I was away."

"Oh, but she has," said Diane indignantly.

"Yes—she certainly has."

They smiled at each other, conspirators, laughing a little at Marte's doubt, the absurdity of Marte's doubt about this Robin who seemed so perfect.

He came out of the house then with a tray of drinks, and set it on the little table near his father's elbow, dropping into the deck chair on the other side. They sat in companionable silence for a moment or two. Presently John said, "When are you going, Rob? Have you any idea?"

"Only vaguely. I should get some embarkation leave as well as this."

Diane looked hurriedly away at the tennis players.

"I don't think it will be long," John said, "A year at most. You'll be finishing a job. When I went the Japs were running all over the Pacific and we had nothing to stop them."

Something in his eyes, a flicker of hate that Robin could not bear to see there, made him say quickly, "We're going to stop them, Dad."

It seemed suddenly very strange to John that he should have left Robin still a schoolboy, and now he was a warrior, going away, passing as though at a crossroads, to that same war he had just left.

"But we shall have Diane with us," John said slowly, "That will help. All being together."

Diane said suddenly, "Robin—we still have time. Shall we get married before you go?"

They all looked at one another, as though she had thrown down some sort of challenge, a belief in the promise of the future among all the doubts and pitfalls that crowded round

them. Robin reached across and took her hand, and they both looked at John.

"Yes," he said quietly, "It's up to you to decide. But that's what I should do."

Diane rose to her feet. "I'm going in to help your mother and Lydia. I'll call when supper is ready."

They watched her slender figure go up the few steps and into the house, and then turned to one another, talking companionably about a variety of things, a decision taken and everything slipping quietly into place.

Ian went home immediately after supper, saying he had a call to make. It had been a great strain for Lydia, this long summer evening, sitting at the table with them all talking, laughing, discussing the sudden excitement of Robin and Diane's wedding plans, and all the time watching Ian, watching that thin, fine, sensitive face, noticing how carefully he kept all his conversation general, and avoided directing it to her.

He shook hands all round, and came to her last, saying quickly, "Good-bye, Lydia," and there was something so final in his voice, that her heart panicked, and she said, without thought, only with a deep desire not to let him go, "I'll walk down the road with you, Ian."

He glanced at her quickly, but made no protest. She saw her mother glance at her, and tried to look away, so she should not see the colour mounting to her cheeks. A few minutes later, they were walking back down the wide tree-shaded road.

She said hurriedly, anxious to find something to say, "Ian—it was wonderful of you to think of putting the plate back on the gate. It was just the right thing—it sort of clinched things."

"For me too," he said.

She stopped in the shade of the trees, shaking with sudden apprehension. "Ian. What do you mean?"

"I mean in a little while, when your father has recovered and got back into practice, it lets me out. I'll sell up, and leave. Go back into research—it's what I've always wanted to do."

"You want to go away, Ian?"

"Yes."

Silence hung between them, and she felt as though her heart

would break—literally break with the sharpness of the pain. Her voice when she found it was hard and stifled.

"Is it because you really want to go, or is it because of me, Ian?"

He hesitated, and she rushed on, "You don't really want to go. Your life is with your patients, the patients who know and trust you. You know that even with father working again, there is more work than both of you can do. It is because of me, isn't it?"

He said painfully, "I love you, Lydia. You know that. You've known it for some time. I know now that Larry has gone out of your life, but it isn't enough, Lydia. I don't want you to turn to me as a second best, perhaps because of some kind of gratitude . . ."

"Gratitude!" she said angrily, fiercely. "'How about me? Do you think if I hadn't owed you such a debt, if you had not helped Robin, and all of us, and me . . . me most of all, saving my pride and my feelings, and preventing me from making an idiotic mistake . . . do you think I shouldn't have come down to your house and rung the bell, and sat on the step until you had to see me, so I could say, 'Ian, I've come through on to the other side of madness, but forgive me, and forget it, because I love you . . .'"

He said one word, "Lydia . . ." and stepped forward. She put her arms up and round his neck, and her face against his, and he knew the truth of her love and longing. "Oh, Lydia," he said "Are you sure?"

"Sure?" she said, smiling, but the tears were running down her cheeks, "Oh, Ian—kiss me."

Marte dropped down beside John, on the side of the long chair, where earlier, Diane had been sitting. The light was fading, but Jim and Bunty had resumed their game, playing with a keen, tireless energy that was wonderful to watch. Robin and Diane were in the kitchen doing the dishes to an accompaniment of dance music—their voices could be heard raised in harmony in a melancholy melody of love and renunciation.

In the dusk he pulled her down against him, burying his lips in her curly, greying hair.

"Three years," he said, "I was just a little scared—coming back, scared that everything good would have altered. But they are just the same. Older, with more problems, a

little more complex. But still just as I left them. Was it hard work, darling? "

She smiled in the darkness. One day she would tell him all about it—one day. She said now, "You kept the idea of home. We might have broken it, if we'd ever lost the idea of you. But we managed to keep it, darling . . . we just managed to keep it."

THE END

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